The Hunger Games - Haymitch Abernathy

by Everlarked

Summary

This is The Hunger Games from Haymitch's POV. We're going to watch the Games with Haymitch's eyes now. How will he choose his gifts? How will he coach Katniss and Peeta? How does he deal with his alcoholism? Read and find out.

Notes

I don't own the Hunger Games.
Haymitch's POV will have a lot of alcohol.
Part 1: The Tributes. Chapter 1: The Reaping

When I wake up from a slumber I’m not really sure where I am or why I am awake, or alive for that matter. The hard banging on the door gives me the answer to the first questions. The question of life will have to wait. Probably for an eternity. I find myself sitting in a chair at my kitchen table in my house in the Victor's Village of District Twelve. Where I've lived alone for the past twenty four years after I became victor in the fiftieth Hunger Games of our country, Panem.

The Hunger Games are the way for the Capitol to show the rest of the country who's in charge and that we're nothing to them. Disposable, a piece in their Games. Although we’re also very necessary, something they’re aware of too. Panem consists out of a Capitol surrounded by twelve districts. These districts give the people in the Capitol what they want. Bread and Games. Killing Games. Becoming a victor in those games equals becoming a murderer. So that’s what I am too.

“Mr. Abernathy!” The door opens and a man walks in. A Capitol citizen, that much is clear. You can tell by the way they talk, the way they look and the way they dress. This one is dressed in a dark glittery suit and has a whole load of make-up on his face. Probably one of Effie Trinket’s assistants.

“Mr. Abernathy, your presence is required in the town square,” the man says. “It’s Reaping Day.”

Oh, right. Reaping Day. Probably the worst day of the year. Another two kids to escort to death. Always a pleasure. I take a draught from the bottle of white liquor standing on the kitchen table. The alcohol surges through my body. Dulling my emotions, dulling the pain. Although it never really goes away.

Reaping Day is the day on which two new tributes of our district are chosen for the Hunger Games. This year is the seventy fourth year. In the past twenty three years I've witnessed the death of forty six children. District Twelve doesn't stand a chance in these Games and I've given up hope for any future tribute. I'm destined to be a mentor to them for the rest of my life regardless, with or without hope. This knowledge makes me take another couple of mouthfuls from the bottle.

The Capitol attendant looks down on me with a disapproving look, which I can't be bothered with. Slowly I get out of the chair, take the bottle of liquor to put it in my pocket and follow him to the car outside. It will take me to the center of town, where the reaping takes place. The town square is not far from the Victor's Village, but we're already late, so the attendant insists I take a place on the backseat of the car and then he drives me to the square in less than a minute.

The reaping has already started. The mayor is busy reading the stupid Treaty of Treason, followed by a list of District Twelve's Victors. Tran Joseman was the first victor and my mentor, he died about fifteen years ago. My name is next and when the mayor calls it I stagger unto the stage. I don't see clearly, the liquor has begun its attack on my brain. "Brgrsll," I get out. In my mind I was saying something that made sense, but it doesn't come out right. It's a blur, the fogginess of the alcohol makes everything jumble together. I fall into the chair next to Effie Trinket and try to give her a hug. "Effie!" I slur, "Gleatseenyou.”

She pushes me away impatiently and gets up to walk to the microphone. Time for the reaping. As always, ladies first. The girl who is called is a twelve year old Seam girl. Dead within the hour, I think. But then something unexpected happens. There's a murmur going through the crowd, something is causing a commotion. I hear a voice calling. "Prim!" And then, "I volunteer! I volunteer as tribute!"

I look into the crowd to see the girl who said it. I know her from the Hob. The black market where I buy my white liquor and where she comes to sell her game. A Seam girl, a feisty one too. She climbs on the stage and Effie asks her name. "Katniss Everdeen."

Effie, of course, replies with something ridiculous. "I bet my buttons that was your sister. Don’t want her to steal all the glory, do we? Come on, everybody! Let's give a big round of applause to our newest tribute!"
She starts to clap enthusiastically but no one follows her example.

A volunteer, I think. A Seam girl volunteer. I look at the sixteen year old girl in front of me and it stuns me how much she looks like her. Like Laurene. Laurene was feisty too, and she had the same grey Seam eyes as this one does. I get out of the chair and stumble towards the girl. "Look at her. Look at this one!" I throw my arm around her shoulders and squeeze her tightly. "I like her! Lots of..."

What was I trying to say? Lots of? Oh yes, I remember. "Spunk! More than you!"

I'm shouting at the camera now, not entirely aware of what I'm doing and if it’s a wise thing to do. All I know now is how much she reminds me of Laurene. And how they took her from me. My girl, my love.

"More than you!" I shout again.

I take a step forward, intending to tell the Capitol how I despise them because of what they've done to her. But I lose my balance and fall off the stage. My head hits the concrete tiles of the square and then everything grows black.

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The weird sensation of moving without doing anything brings me back to my senses. I become aware of my surroundings and see I'm already on the train that takes me with Effie Trinket and the tributes to the Capitol. Unsteadily I get to my feet and walk out of my compartment through the train in search of a drink. In the bar-car I order a bottle of wine and a bottle of liquor and start drinking. Not ready to face the tributes yet. And not ready to watch them die.

The door of the car opens and in walks a blond boy, about sixteen years old. I recognize him as one of the kids from the bakery. Merchant class. He must be the boy tribute, called after I fell from the stage. "What's your name?" I ask him.

"Peeta Mellark," he says and extends his hand to me. I ignore it and turn away from him. Not ready to face these tributes. Need sleep. "I'm going to take a nap," I mumble and stagger back to my own room.

In my room I finish the whole bottle of wine and start with the liquor right after it. I started drinking almost immediately after I won my Games. My Games. There were 48 of us, twice as much as the regular amount of tributes because it was a Quell. I couldn't care less about that. All I cared about was finding a way out of there. A way to escape, even though I knew it was impossible. I kept searching until I reached the edge of the arena. An abyss. There I found out the arena was surrounded by a force field that will throw back everything that’s tossed against it. And there was no way out. There still is no way out. A girl from District One, who was the last tribute still alive besides me, was chasing me and threw her axe at me. But it missed and fell in the ravine from where it came back and buried itself in her head. That’s how I won my Games, although I don’t consider myself a winner. President Snow was mad, because I made him and his precious Games look foolish. And no one can treat him like a fool. I’ve learned that the hard way. He killed my family and my girlfriend within two weeks after I’ve won. I’ve been drinking ever since.

Drinking. Drinking still. The growling in my stomach makes me get up in search for some food. I stumble into the dining car which is empty. In the next room I find Effie, Katniss and Peeta sitting in front of the television. Confused about this and suddenly feeling nauseated I grasp a chair. "I miss supper?" I ask. Another wave of nausea comes over me and I start to puke. The convulsions in my body make it impossible for me to keep standing, my knees buckle and I fall down in my own vomit. I'm not sure what's going on when I feel two pairs of hands on me and I'm hauled up to my feet. "I tripped?" I ask, rattled by the mess I see. "Smells bad." I wipe my nose trying to get rid of the smell but it's not helping.

"Let's get you back to your room," someone says, "Clean you up a bit."

They start to drag me to my room and push me into the bathtub. I hardly notice it. I hardly notice
anything anymore these days.

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The sun is pouring through the windows of the train as I wake up in the morning. I'm lying in my bed, wearing clean pyjamas, a smell of soap surrounds me. Someone must have cleaned me up and put me to bed. Vaguely I remember the two kids dragging me through the train. Did they do this? The tributes? Weird.

I dress quickly and go to the dining car to have breakfast. The table is already set and I take a seat and pour myself some cranberry juice. A bottle of vodka would be a good addition to it. I order it from an attendant who brings it in only seconds later. One of the few positives about being on the train again. Attendants at my beck and call constantly.

Effie and Peeta enter the car and join me at the table. We exchange some empty comments, I insult Effie with them, like usual. She walks away distressed just as Katniss enters.

"Sit down! Sit down!" I say to her and wave her over. The scowl on her face tells me she's not one for an easy conversation. The kids start eating like they never ate before. It’s the same every year. Luxurious food is something that’s not accessible to the inhabitants of District Twelve. That’s why tributes are always stuffing in as much as they can. I can’t blame them. They’re going to die soon, so why not enjoy life as long as it lasts.

I’m sipping my drink when Katniss suddenly turns her attention to me. "So, you're supposed to give us advice," she says.

"Here's some advice. Stay alive," I say and I burst out laughing. Advice! Is she serious? She might as well ask me for the moon, for all the good it will do her.

I do notice she exchanges a meaningful look with the boy. That seems odd. These two kids are supposed to be adversaries. I’ve never in my whole career as a mentor seen the tributes exchange looks like this one before. Most of the time tributes ignore each other. Wonder what that’s about.

"That's very funny," Peeta says. Suddenly he lashes out at the glass in my hand with an unexpected force. I’m not prepared so the glass goes flying through the room and ends up against the wall in the back of the train. "Only not to us."

Well, it’s not very funny to me either. He just spilled my entire drink. Who the hell does he think he is? In a sudden rage I lunge forward and punch the kid in his jaw. Overestimating my own force, because he falls out of the chair on the ground. Not that I care. I reach for the bottle of vodka to pour myself a new drink when another surprise hits me. Katniss drives her butter knife so fast into the table that it barely misses my fingers.

This is new.

Both of them.

I sit back and stare at their faces. They’re flushed with anger. "Well, what's this?" I say, genuinely surprised. "Did I actually get a pair of fighters this year?"

Peeta gets up from the ground and takes a handful of ice to put on his face. There’s a red mark showing on his jaw from where I hit him.

"No," I say, holding up my hand. "Let the bruise show. The audience will think you've mixed it up with another tribute before you've even made it to the arena."

"That's against the rules," says Peeta.

"Only if they catch you. That bruise will say you fought, you weren't caught, even better," I tell him. Then I turn to Katniss. "Can you hit anything with that knife besides a table?"

She retrieves the knife from the table and throws it into the wall where it lodges between two panels. I nod approvingly and get up.

"Stand over here. Both of you," I say and make them walk to the middle of the room. They stand next to each other, closer than necessary. I examine their bodies, their faces. They’re not underfed, which is a good sign. He’s merchant, so that makes sense. And she can take care of herself, I’ve seen that too. “Well, you're not entirely hopeless. Seem fit. And once the stylists get hold of you,
you'll be attractive enough.”
They don’t respond, but just stand there, next to each other. Somewhere in my head the thought pops up that they’ll make a good pair. Doesn’t make sense. Can’t save both. Probably can’t save either. Better not let stupid thoughts like these enter my head. Because that will only make things worse.
"All right, I'll make a deal with you.” I tell them, “You don't interfere with my drinking, and I'll stay sober enough to help you. But you have to do exactly what I say.”
Why did I just say this? Deciding to help them is going to be dreadful. They’re going to die anyway, right? Or do I actually think they stand a chance?
"Fine," says Peeta.
"So help us, " Katniss joins in, "When we get to the arena, what's the best strategy at the Cornucopia for someone - "
"One thing at a time. In a few minutes, we'll be pulling into the station. You'll be put in the hands of your stylists. You're not going to like what they do to you. But no matter what it is, don't resist," I say
"But -" Katniss begins.
We’ve not even started and she already begins with protests. This is going to be hard.
"No buts. Don't resist," I tell her sternly. Then I turn around, take the bottle of vodka from the table and leave the car.

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As soon as we’ve pulled into the Capitol I go straight to the standard rendezvous point in one of the back streets of the city. It’s an old building which we’ve searched for trackers, cameras and microphones. It’s cleared and therefore the only place in the world where we can talk. We simply refer to it as the Building. ‘We’ being the group of victors that have a sort of underground thing going on. You could call us rebels, willing to overthrow the government that suppresses us. Willing, but not able. So all we do is sit together and rant. I’m looking forward to see Chaff again. He’s a victor from District Eleven and our shared love for alcohol has created a bond between us. We meet each other about twice a year. During the Games in the Capitol and once every winter, around the time of the Victory Tour. When I enter the Building he’s already there, he started drinking without me and I see he’s out of sorts. “What’s wrong?” I ask.
“I’m still mad about our girl tribute this year,” he says, “A twelve year old, Haymitch! How fair is that?”
“How fair is anything,” I retort, amazed that after all these years Chaff can still get worked up over this. “We had a twelve year old too, but her sister volunteered.”
“Yeah, I’ve seen that. Brave. And you’ve put on quite a show too.” Chaff pours us both a glass of liquor. “Do you think she’ll get past the Cornucopia bloodbath?”
“Who’s to tell, she’s gutsy.” I say while I take the drink he hands me. “I’ll find out in the next couple of days.”
“What? You’re not going to spend them inebriated?” Chaff chuckles.
“No, slightly less inebriated,” I say, “I made a deal with them.”
“With both of them?” Chaff says surprised.
“Yeah, they’re quite a pair.”

The door opens and Finnick enters. Behind him comes a young man with short brown hair, wearing simple black clothes.
“What’s this?” I exclaim, “What do you think you’re doing, Finnick?”
“He’s okay,” Finnick says as he holds up his hands defensively. “He’s in on it.”
“Who are you?” I scowl at the newcomer. He extends his hand to me and I take it reluctantly.
“I’m Cinna. I’m District Twelve’s new stylist, together with my partner, Portia.” He tells me.
“Haymitch,” I say shortly, “Why are you here?”
“Finnick told me about your group. I want to be part of it. I know there’s nothing we can do yet. But enlarging the group of rebels is a start.” Cinna tells me, “And I can do something too, as a
I laugh dismissively. “You can’t do squat.” I sneer at him. “Why are you here anyway? You’re supposed to pretty up my tributes.”
“I’m on my way there now,” Cinna says. “I’ll see you tonight.”
I roll my eyes at Finnick after Cinna leaves. “Was that really necessary?” I ask, “Are you sure he’s safe?”
“I’m sure,” Finnick says. “He hired me for a night last year. We’ve talked all night and he explained that there are more of them here in the Capitol. More people who are willing to fight! One of them even made it to Gamemaker.”
“You’re kidding!” Chaff says, “Who’s he?”
“His name is Plutarch Heavensbee,” Finnick says, “Cinna is not entirely sure if it’s just a rumor though.”
“It’s promising,” Chaff says, “People from the Capitol. They can destabilize the system from the inside out.”
“Don’t get your hopes up,” I grumble.

The tributes parade is the same every year. Thousands of people gathered in the City Circle to cheer on this year’s tributes. Broadcast all over the country. I’m moody because my stylist insisted on putting me in a suit that’s too tight and I haven’t had enough to drink. I’m trying to keep my promise to the kids, but it’s harder than I thought. Then again, there’s something about them that makes me motivated. Although I’m still not sure what it is. Maybe it’s because they’re feisty, maybe this odd stylist, Cinna, has something to do with it too. I can’t put a name to the feeling though, because it’s so unfamiliar.

When the chariots come out I take a careful look at all the tributes to see what they’re up against. The careers look good and brutal as always. The rest of them is just a bunch of scared children. The chariot of Eleven carries the twelve year old girl Chaff was so upset about. She doesn’t stand a chance, but the boy on the other hand. He’s huge. Definitely the one to beat, even for the careers.

Then Katniss and Peeta appear and I’m stunned by the sight of them. District Twelve’s tributes always look horrible in black jumpsuits that don’t even look good on someone like Finnick. But this year, this year is totally different. They’re on fire, both of them. Looking absolutely amazing. This Cinna guy is certainly promising. What sticks to me the most though, is that they’re holding hands. Making them look like friends instead of enemies. They make a good pair. Against my own will, I’m thinking it again.

After the opening ceremony I go to the training center where the tributes stay in the short time before they’re thrown into the arena. When I arrive on the twelfth floor everybody else is already sitting at the dining table and the first course is being served. During dinner I compliment Cinna and his fellow stylist, Portia on their excellent job. Effie’s being less annoying as usual, probably because she’s enthusiastic too about the fiery debut of our tributes.

When we’ve finished dinner we move to the sitting room where the recap of the tributes parade is shown on television. As Katniss and Peeta appear I notice again how their hands are glued together.

“Who’s idea was the hand holding?” I ask.
“Cinna’s,” says Portia.
“Just the perfect touch of rebellion,” I nod at him. “Very nice.”
Then I turn to the kids, “Tomorrow morning is the first training session. Meet me for breakfast and I’ll tell you exactly how I want you to play it. Now go get some sleep while the grown-ups talk.”
I watch them leave the room together and turn to Cinna. “I mean it, very nice, Cinna.” I tell him. “We’ve made matching clothes for them to wear during training as well.” Cinna says, “What do you think about their odds?”
I shrug, “I’m not sure, but I think this whole ‘making them look like friends’ thing is going to be a good tactic.”
“Did they know each other before the reaping?” Portia asks.
“I have no idea.” I tell her honestly. “It’s not likely, he’s merchant, she’s Seam. But they seem to have a connection.” I order another glass of wine and sit back on the couch. Thinking about our next move. The idea is starting to take more form in my head, but will it work?
Part 1: Chapter 2: The Training

Chapter Summary

Haymitch is helping Peeta and Katniss with advice during their training and coaches them both for their interviews.

Chapter Notes

I don't own THG

When I walk into the hall the next morning, Peeta is just coming out of his room. “Hello, Haymitch,” he says. I nod curtly and walk with him to the dining room where Katniss has already started eating. Wearing the same clothes as Peeta, just as Cinna told me.

We eat in silence for a while. There’s a nice stew today and I refill my plate twice. Better eat good, with less alcohol in my blood, or I’m sure to get shivers of withdrawal. But the thought of alcohol alone, already makes me long for it. Who am I kidding? I take a flask with whiskey from my pocket. It was a gift from Chaff. The flask and the whiskey both. I take a swig and put my elbows on the table. First thing I’ve got to do is see if this plan of mine has any chance of succeeding. That will depend on how they’ll react to the question I’m about to ask.

“So, let’s get down to business. Training. First off, if you like, I’ll coach you separately. Decide now.”

“Why would you coach us separately?” Katniss asks.

“Say if you had a secret skill you might not want the other to know about,” I explain. They exchange a look, again. Similar to the one in the train. Do they have any idea about how abnormal their behavior is?

“I don’t have any secret skills,” Peeta says. “And I already know what yours is, right?” he says to Katniss, “I mean, I’ve eaten enough of your squirrels.”

“You can coach us together,” Katniss says. Peeta nods his assent. I’ve got them where I want them.

We talk business in the next hour. Peeta’s strong. Katniss can handle a bow. While we discuss their strategies, they argue with each other about it, which is extremely interesting and confirms my suspicion that there’s something going on with these two. When Peeta confesses his mother has more faith in Katniss than she has in him I see the shock in her eyes.

"But only because someone helped me," she whispers, sounding like a little child, all of a sudden. Peeta looks at the bread clutched in Katniss’s hand as I wonder what she’s talking about. There’s history between them.

Peeta just shrugs. “People will help you in the arena. They’ll be tripping over each other to sponsor you.”

“No more than you,” Katniss retorts.

Peeta looks up at me and rolls his eyes, which makes me chuckle a bit. “She has no idea. The effect she can have.”

There’s silence after this as I observe them, refusing to look at each other like two school kids in love. That’s it! They act like they’re in love! I don’t know if they actually are in love. She at least is not the type for it, sullen and hostile. But this is an eye opener for me and works even better for
what I had in mind. Presenting them as a team. Making it seem like they’re friends instead of foes. I’m not sure what it will gain, but at least it has rebellion written all over it. And that’s better than nothing.

From what I’ve heard about it, they have some skills too. Their odds are getting better by the minute. And the boy is right, there’s something about Katniss that pulls everyone to her. I’m thinking back to the parade yesterday, how the audience was screaming her name. It’s hard to put a name to it, but she definitely has a quality. And her existence is focused on survival, that in itself is a very good feature for the Games.

“Well, then. Well, well, well.” I say, “Katniss, there’s no guarantee there’ll be bows and arrows in the arena, but during your private session with the Gamemakers, show them what you can do. Until then, stay clear of archery. Are you any good at trapping?”

“I know a few basic snares,” Katniss mumbles.

“That may be significant in terms of food,” I say. “And Peeta, she’s right, never underestimate strength in the arena. Very often, physical power tilts the advantage to a player. In the Training Center, they will have weights, but don’t reveal how much you can lift in front of the other tributes. The plan’s the same for both of you. You go to group training. Spend the time trying to learn something you don’t know. Throw a spear. Swing a mace. Learn to tie a decent knot. Save showing what you’re best at until your private sessions. Are we clear?”

They nod in unison.

“One last thing.” I say, as if it’s something casual, “In public, I want you by each other’s side every minute.”

They both start to object now but I slam my hand on the table. “Every minute! It's not open for discussion! You agreed to do as I said! You will be together, you will appear amiable to each other. Now get out. Meet Effie at the elevator at ten for training.”

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In the next days the kids train and I hang around with Chaff in the Building. Johanna Mason from District Seven joins us occasionally and Finnick as well. We drink, we chat a little. Not about this year’s tributes though. Never about them. When it comes to them, we as mentors are opponents too.

In the evening I eat with Effie and the tributes and question them about everything, to see if I can get any useful information considering the arena and the other tributes. My promise to them to stay sober is wearing me down. I’m more cranky than usual and tell myself again and again that this was a mistake. These kids will die and all my efforts will be in vain.

This whole stupid idea of presenting them as a team starts to gnaw on me too. How will this help the rebellion, seriously? It will only blow up in my face when they’re going to hunt each other down in that arena. Although a part of me believes that they won’t do that.

Chaff tells me to let the rebellion go. There’s not enough resistance. There are rumors, but nothing substantial. “Just focus on keeping one of them alive,” he says, “That’s your job.”

“One of them,” I snort, “Which one? You have any idea?”

He gives a deep sigh but can’t give me an answer. I am the only mentor who has two kids under my wings. All of the others have a fellow victor to help them. They don’t have to choose, like I do. And how can I possibly decide which kid to save. It means I’ll have to give up on the other. Katniss or Peeta.

“I don’t want to choose,” I mutter. Maybe it’s better if they both die.

After three days of training the tributes will face their individual assessments. Peeta will lift weights, Katniss will show her skill with the bow and the Gamemakers will score them. I know that by the time they’ve reached District Twelve, those Gamemakers will probably have lost the little interest they had, which usually reflects into low scores. This year won’t be an exception.

Peeta arrives back first, not giving any comments on how it went. When Katniss arrives she runs to her own room and refuses to come out, no matter how much Effie pleads and I threaten. At the
dinner table Katniss appears with eyes red from crying. I ignore that and chat a little with Cinna about cursory issues. When I deem the time right I ask them what happened. Peeta opens up first. “I don’t know that it mattered. By the time I showed up, no one even bothered to look at me. They were singing some kind of drinking song, I think. So, I threw around some heavy objects until they told me I could go.”

Like I suspected. I turn to Katniss next.

"And you, sweetheart?" I ask her, trying to coax her into talking. She looks a little baffled by my addressing her like that, but then admits, "I shot an arrow at the Gamemakers."

This I didn’t expect. The others are as perplexed as I am.

"You what?" asks Effie, appalled.

"I shot an arrow at them. Not exactly at them. In their direction. It’s like Peeta said, I was shooting and they were ignoring me and I just... I just lost my head, so I shot an apple out of their stupid roast pig's mouth!" Katniss says, and I hear the defiance in her voice.

The others comment some more on it while I think it through. Will this harm her? Or do her good? They might interpret it as bravery, which could work in her advantage. There’s no way to tell, we’ll have to wait for the scores. Either way, the girl surprised me. I have a good feeling about it.

“Well, that's that,” I say while I start to butter a roll.

“Do you think they'll arrest me?” Katniss asks me.

“Doubt it. Be a pain to replace you at this stage,” I respond.

"What about my family?" she says. "Will they punish them?"

"Don't think so. Wouldn't make much sense. See they'd have to reveal what happened in the Training Center for it to have any worthwhile effect on the population. People would need to know what you did. But they can't since it's secret, so it'd be a waste of effort," I tell her. "More likely they'll make your life hell in the arena."

"Well, they've already promised to do that to us any way," says Peeta. I look at the boy, see the admiration in his eyes. "Very true," I say. I take a piece of pork chop, dip it in my wine and take a huge bite. I picture the Gamemakers drinking, joking around, not paying attention. And then suddenly, that arrow. The idea makes me chuckle. "What were their faces like?" I ask.

Katniss looks at me and I see a small smile creep on her face. "Shocked. Terrified. Uh, ridiculous, some of them. One man tripped backward into a bowl of punch."

At that I laugh out loud and the others join in. Even Effie suppresses a smile, which I can appreciate. "Well, it serves them right. It's their job to pay attention to you," she says, "And just because you come from District Twelve is no excuse to ignore you." She looks at our surprised faces and adds "I'm sorry, but that's what I think."

After dinner we go to the living room to watch the scores. Peeta gets an eight, which I’m content with. Katniss’s score is more of a question. What will they do? See it as a challenge or a threat? When the eleven appears on screen I’m not sure. This can still mean both. An eleven will give her a red mark. The first thing the careers will do is hunt her down. But in terms of sponsors it’s promising.

The others applaud and Katniss herself is utterly surprised. "There must be a mistake. How... how could that happen?" she asks me.

"Guess they liked your temper. They've got a show to put on." I explain, "They need some players with some heat."

I send the kids to bed and sink back on the couch, lost in thoughts. An eight and an eleven. She’ll get more sponsors than he with this score, that is, if she’ll do well on the interview. But does that mean I have to choose her and cast the boy aside. Somehow this doesn’t sit well with me. Because I can’t help but like him. More than her, to be honest. He’s funny, and smart. She’s smart too, but oh so stubborn and bad-tempered.

What to do?
In the morning Effie and I sit at the breakfast table when Peeta comes in. After he fills his plate he comes to sit next to me. “Haymitch?” he starts.

“Hmm,” I grumble, still not quite awake yet.

“I want to be coached individually for the interview,” Peeta says out of the blue. I drop my fork and examine the boy’s face. Trying to discern where his request comes from. Effie looks a little dismayed.

“Why would you-” Effie starts, but I wave her away.

“Sure. That sounds like a good idea.” I tell Peeta. Then I turn to Effie, ”We split them up, four hours with each of them. I’ll discuss content and you appearances.” Effie nods and at that point Katniss enters the room.

“I’ll tell her about this,” I say to Peeta.

After Katniss has plated up and started eating, she asks what our next move is.

"Well, there's been a change of plans. About our current approach," I tell her.

"What's that?" she asks, indifferently.

"Peeta has asked to be coached separately."

I see a flash of hurt cross her face but she straightens her expression soon after.

"Good," she says. "So what's the schedule?"

"You'll each have four hours with Effie for presentation and four with me for content," I explain.

"You start with Effie, Katniss."

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After breakfast, I take Peeta to the living room. “Tell me, why do you want to be coached separately for the interviews?” I ask him.

He’s staring at the ground as if he’s expecting to find the answer there. When none is forthcoming I probe, “Is it because of the eleven, yesterday?”

He looks up and shakes his head. “No, not because of the eleven. But I want to make a confession during that interview tomorrow, and I don’t know if it’s a good idea that Katniss will know about it. That’s what I want to discuss with you.”

There’s a short silence before he continues, “I’ve had a crush on her since I was five years old.” I raise my eyebrows but don’t comment on it. Everything falls into place though. It’s what I thought. He’s in love with her.

“I was thinking about telling this to Caesar Flickerman at the interview.” Peeta continues, “I was thinking, it may give her... uhm, us an edge in the Games. What do you think?”

What do I think? I’m thinking this is great. I let out a laugh and say loudly, “You love her!” Peeta looks a bit disturbed, “shh,” he says.

“Sorry... But it’s a great idea,” I tell him, “I love it. And it’s going to work, I’m sure of it. People will be enthusiastic about this and hopefully line up to sponsor the both of you. Star-crossed lovers, it’s promising.” I take a sip from my coffee and look at the boy in front of me intently.

“You’re right about not wanting to tell Katniss about it,” I say, “She needs to be taken by surprise, I think that will bring the best reaction out of her. Otherwise it would seem forced.”

“But how do I do this?” Peeta asks, “because we don’t know if Caesar Flickerman will ask me about it.”

“Well, if he doesn’t ask you about it you should just give him a hint. Flickerman is a professional, he always asks the right questions. Trust me on that one.” I say, thinking about Flickerman and his ease to read people. I might even be able to tip him off.

“I don’t know how everyone will react,” Peeta says, a bit uncertain. “Especially Katniss.”

“Everyone will be blown away!” I say, “And don’t worry about Katniss, she would be hard to convince.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“Well, she is a distrusting person. She’ll believe you said it just for the advance it will give you. I doubt if she will believe you mean it.”
We discuss his approach on the interview and settle on self-deprecating humour. When we’re done talking his interview through, Peeta comes up with the idea of becoming part of the career pack.

“Why would you want to be a part of the career pack?” I ask him. He shrugs and stays quiet.

“Listen boy, if you want to be part of the pack, you’d better give me a reason so I can see what I can do for you.” I say impatiently.

“I was just thinking, because of that eleven,” Peeta says hesitantly, “The careers will try to kill her. It’ll be the first thing they’ll do.”

“And you want to help them with that?” I ask sarcastically.

“I could throw them off track,” he says, “Lead them astray. It’ll help her.” I stare at the boy and shake my head. He’s right about one thing, the first thing the pack will do in the arena is hunt her down. Her eleven and this interview he’s planning will put her high on their kill list. But for him to want to protect her...

“You’re really something.” I say. It’s only now that I come to realize the full meaning of his confession. He loves her and wants to protect her. He wants her to live. This decides it then, I’ll have to choose her. Between the two of us, we might be able to get her home. It will mean the death of the boy but for the first time in all my years of mentoring I have the idea that it might be possible. And I identify the feeling I felt before, during the tributes parade. It’s hope. This boy gives me a feeling of hope. Hope mixed with bitterness, because it will cost him his life.

Katniss herself, however, is not cooperative. I try to prep her for her interview, but I realize I have no idea what to do with her. Nothing works on this girl. She isn’t willing to open up. She’s not cheery, not humble, not witty, not funny, not sexy, not mysterious. She’s nothing, really. Halfway during the afternoon I give up and start drinking. Already disappointed in myself for choosing her. Maybe I should go for the boy anyway. In the end it’s my decision, not his. At the end I tell her, “I give up, sweetheart. Just answer the questions and try not to let the audience see how openly you despise them.” She shoots me a nasty look and disappears in her room for the rest of the night.

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In the evening of the next day the interviews are held. Each tribute will be given the time to present themselves to the public, and it will give sponsors a good opportunity to get to know the tributes better and decide who to sponsor.

For the occasion my own stylist, Francis, puts me in a suit again. This one’s slightly better than the one I had to wear during the parade. When I meet up with the rest of our team at the elevator I’m again positively surprised by how my kids are dressed. The stylists have done a great job. Peeta’s in a black suit with flame accents and Katniss wears a beautiful gown. She’s avoiding me though, probably because everything went so well between us yesterday.

Fine. Whatever. The girl is going to make a mess out of this interview anyway.

Just before they walk onto stage I remember to tell them to keep up the friend act. Which won’t be difficult for Peeta, but Katniss looks mad. It’s hard to figure her out, I think. What’s going on inside that brain of hers? I wonder if she even knows the answer herself.

I’ve instructed Caesar Flickerman to ask Peeta if he has a girlfriend. Caesar’s always looking for something to spice up his interviews and my request wasn’t too odd. He didn’t even question it.

“No problem, Haymitch!” he said, smiling, “I’ll ask him and I’ll be curious what his answer will be. Hahaha!”

The man is appalling, but he’ll have to do. At least he’s working with me. And I think Peeta’s confession will do Katniss good. But first she has to perform herself. District Twelve is last, as usual, but the interviews only last three minutes, so it’s going fast enough. When Katniss enters the stage I notice how nervous she is. Caesar has his own ways to make tributes feel at ease and
he manages this with her too.

After they joke a little about the food and the opening ceremonies, Katniss twirls around in the dress, which makes her look like she’s on fire. The audience is cheering her on while she’s spinning around. She comes to a stop and clutches Caesar's arm.

"Don't stop!" he says. "I have to, I'm dizzy!" she says, giggling. She comes off like a real teenage girl for the first time since I’ve met her.

Caesar wraps an arm around her. "Don't worry, I've got you. Can't have you following in your mentor's footsteps."

Everyone bursts out in laughter and the camera focuses on me. I'm waving them away, smiling, but then I point back to her. This interview is not about me or my problems with alcohol.

After they discuss the eleven in training, Ceasar brings the conversation on the reaping.

"Let's go back then, to the moment they called your sister's name at the reaping," says Caesar. "And you volunteered. Can you tell us about her?"

"Her name's Prim. She's just twelve." Katniss says quietly, "And I love her more than anything."

"What did she say to you? After the reaping?" Caesar asks. I see Katniss is having trouble opening up to him. She doesn't want these people to know. Because she despises them. I get that, I really do, but it would gain her nothing. Say the words, I think, say them!

"She asked me to try really hard to win." There’s total silence in the City Circle.

"And what did you say?" Caesar’s doing his job well.

A hush has fallen over the audience, but when Katniss speaks again her voice sounds cold. "I swore I would."

"I bet you did," says Caesar. The buzzer goes off. "Sorry we're out of time. Best of luck, Katniss Everdeen, tribute from District Twelve."

I'm pleased with the applause and see Cinna giving her a thumbs-up from the corner of my eye. Peeta’s next. I wonder how he'll do, but I have more faith in him than I had in her. And she did better than expected. Even though her last sentence sounded way too cold hearted.

Peeta and Caesar have a good chemistry. He’s very funny when he compares the other tributes to the breads from their districts.

"And how do you find the Capitol?" Caesar asks him, "It must be different than back home."

"Well, yes," Peeta says, "The showers, Caesar. They are really different. Tell me, do I still smell like roses?"

Caesar laughs and Peeta encourages him to take a whiff. They both start sniffing at each other which makes the audience roar in laughter.

"You smell better than I do." Peeta says to Caesar.

"Well, I’ve lived here longer." Caesar replies.

"That makes sense."

After this, Caesar finally asks him if he has a girlfriend back home. Peeta gives an unconvincing shake of his head. He’s doing a really good job and Caesar picks it up immediately. "Handsome lad like you. There must be some special girl. Come on, what's her name?"

Peeta sighs. "Well, there is this one girl. I've had a crush on her ever since I can remember. But I'm pretty sure she didn't know I was alive until the reaping."

He plays the crowd perfectly.

"She have another fellow?" asks Caesar.

"I don't know, but a lot of boys like her," says Peeta.

"So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She can't turn you down then, eh?" says Caesar. It’s as if someone gave him a scripted version of Peeta’s idea. He does a perfect job.

"I don't think it's going to work out. Winning... won't help in my case," says Peeta. In the silence that follows you can hear a pin drop. People are on the edge of their seat to find out what he could
possibly mean with this.
"Why ever not?" says Caesar, clearly surprised and curious as well.
Peeta blushes beet red and stammers out. "Because… because… she came here with me."
Part 2: The Games. Chapter 1: The Headquarters

Chapter Summary

The Games are starting, but this time we get to see it from the outside, from the Gamemakers Headquarters. Haymitch has his own room, from where he can follow the Games and send gifts if needed. But before he can send gifts, he needs sponsors. Did Peeta's interview do the trick?

Chapter Notes

I don't own THG

For a moment, the cameras hold on Peeta's downcast eyes as what he says sinks in. All around me there are gasps and shrieks of surprise. He’s done it, blown all the others away with his performance. The truth has dawned on Katniss too. Her mouth hangs open in surprise as she realizes he’s talking about her. Then she becomes aware of how she must come across and I see her press her lips together and stare at the floor. She’s genuinely surprised and I wonder if she believes him. She’s the suspicious kind. Probably thinks he did it to make her look bad. That wouldn’t surprise me.

Caesar recovers from the shock as well and resumes the interview. "Oh, that is a piece of bad luck."
"It's not good," Peeta agrees.
"Well, I don't think any of us can blame you. It'd be hard not to fall for that young lady," says Caesar. "She didn't know?"
Peeta shakes his head. "Not until now."
I can see the colour in his cheeks. He probably feels guilty for telling this to the world before she knew about it. I think this is the only way it’ll make an impact. It makes me feel confident about the amount of sponsors they’ll get. First the parade, then the training scores, now the interviews. Things are looking good.
"Wouldn't you love to pull her back out here and get a response?" Caesar asks the audience. Everyone around me starts to hoot and scream. I hope they won’t do it though, because I’m not sure if Katniss’s response is going to be a positive one.
Thankfully Caesar tells them it can’t be done. "Sadly, rules are rules, and Katniss Everdeen's time has been spent. Well, best of luck to you, Peeta Mellark, and I think I speak for all of Panem when I say our hearts go with yours."
The crowd is roaring now, enthusiastic for Peeta’s confession. “Thank you,” he chokes out and goes back to his seat. When the tributes rise for the anthem the camera focuses on my kids. Standing next to each other. Peeta looks sad, Katniss baffled. They’re getting more screen time than any other tribute. He’s done such a good job and I’m so proud of him. I curse myself for getting emotionally attached to the kid. She has better odds, he’ll protect her in the arena. I have to go for the girl.

The interviews are over and I go to Finnick to talk about the option of Peeta becoming part of the career pack.
“Haymitch!” Finnick calls out, when he sees me, “Those kids of yours, they’re geniuses!
Especially the boy, with that whole love story. That was some smart thinking.”

“It was his own idea,” I tell him. “He’s a smart kid. And I’ve come to ask you about him, because he wants to be part of the career pack. Is that a possibility?”

“So you’re choosing him then, despite her eleven?” Finnick asks.

“That eleven is not going to help her,” I say, not wanting to reveal any more information to him about my choices. “How about the careers, can you talk to your tributes?”

“Why should I?” Finnick asks.

“He’s valuable, he’s strong,” I sum up, “Maybe he can tell them something about how she got that eleven?”

Finnick lets out a laugh. “I’m sure he can. I’ll talk to Brandon.”

It’s so weird to haggle with Finnick like this. Making him believe I’m choosing the boy. Talking about the tributes like we’re horse trading or something. It’s the only way for us to handle it and maintain our friendship, but it feels wrong somehow. This is the first time since about twenty years that I make an effort for my tributes, and I’m not liking how this affects my relationship with the other victors. Next year, I tell myself, I’m going to lay low again.

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Effie comes towards us and tells me to come with her to the twelfth floor for dinner with the tributes. Cinna and Portia are at the elevators as well and together we ride upwards to our floor. When the doors open the first thing we see is Peeta lying on the ground, surrounded by a hundred shattered pieces of pottery.

“What’s going on?” says Effie, while she runs forward to grasp Peeta’s arm. “Did you fall?”

Cinna comes to his aid as well and together they help him up.

"After she shoved me," says Peeta gruffly.

"This was your idea, wasn’t it? Turning me into some kind of fool in front of the entire country?" she says by way of reply.

"It was my idea," Peeta says while he pulls spikes of pottery out of his hands. "Haymitch just helped me with it."

"Yes, Haymitch is very helpful. To you!" Katniss spits out.

Her attitude makes me angry. "You are a fool," I say to her, the contempt clear in my voice. "Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own."

"He made me look weak!" she retorts.

"He made you look desirable!" I raise my voice in anger at her stupidity, “And let’s face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You’re all they’re talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!"

"But we're not star-crossed lovers!" Katniss protests.

What is the girl thinking? What could it possibly matter when it’s a matter of life and death? I grab her shoulders and push her against the wall. "Who cares?" I spit out, “It's all a big show. It's all how you're perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that in itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you're a heartbreaker. Oh, oh, oh, how the boys back home fall longingly at your feet. Which do you think will get you more sponsors?"

She shoves me away and steps out of my reach. I take a deep breath while Cinna tries to persuade her in a kinder way. Why do I even bother, I think.

Fortunately Katniss comes to her senses and sees that he indeed did her a favour.

"After he said he loved me, did you think I could be in love with him, too?" she asks us, her voice trembles a little. I’m reminded that she’s just a girl, probably terrified by what lies in front of her.

"I did," says Portia. "The way you avoided looking at the cameras, the blush."

I can’t do anything else but agree with that. Maybe I was a bit too harsh on her just now.

"You're golden, sweetheart." I tell her, “You're going to have sponsors lined up around the
Katniss cast down her eyes for a moment and then turns to Peeta. "I'm sorry I shoved you."
"Doesn't matter," he shrugs. "Although it's technically illegal."
"Are your hands okay?" she asks. The worry in her voice makes me wonder what he means to her. He’s in love with her, that much is clear. But what are her feelings towards him?
"They'll be all right," Peeta answers.
I guess in the end it doesn’t really matter what she feels. Peeta has already accepted his fate and I shouldn’t focus on something as arbitrary as their feelings. It’s about staying alive now.
"Come on, let's eat," I say and walk to the dinner table. Peeta’s hands need to be treated first but we start without him. When he comes back with bandaged hands I see Katniss look at them, guilt written on her face.

We watch the replay of the interviews and after that it’s time to say goodbye. Effie and I are expected at the Games Headquarters this evening. People will be waiting there, eager to hand us their money. I’m positive there will be a lot of sponsors this year. More than usual, much more. Effie stands up and holds out her hands to the kids. “It has been such a privilege to be your escort this year,” she says, “You both have been amazing, the best tributes I’ve ever had. Truly. And I wish you good luck.”
She looks at them with teary eyes and adds, “I wouldn't be at all surprised if I finally get promoted to a decent district next year!"
Leave it to Effie to say something stupid.
While she runs out of the room, overwhelmed by her emotions I get up myself and cross my arms, looking over my tributes.
"Any final words of advice?" asks Peeta.
"When the gong sounds, get the hell out of there. You're neither of you up to the blood bath at the Cornucopia. Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water,” I tell them. "Got it?"
This advice is only for Katniss, really, because Peeta needs to throw himself in the thick of the fight if he wants to be part of the career pack. But I can’t tell him that in front of her. She’s better off not knowing his intentions, because I’m not sure she’s willing to let him protect her. Probably not. Would hurt her ego too much. And I don’t think she’ll trust him either.
"And after that?" Katniss asks.
"Stay alive," I say solemnly. They both nod and with that I brusquely turn around to follow Effie. Leaving Peeta to his own devices, I’m sure he can put two and two together.

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We arrive at the Games Headquarters a little after ten in the evening. All the other mentors and escorts have already arrived.
The Games Headquarters is a large building in which the Gamemakers are working twenty-four seven on the games. All the mentors and escorts have a private room where we can sign up sponsors and decide on what gifts we want to send our tributes and when. The rooms have several screens on which we can follow the Games. There are attendants at our beck and call, to watch the screens and take notes for us. They also take over our jobs when we sleep, as far as we want them to, that is. I don’t trust attendants from the Capitol, so I’m making a mental note to order a mattress so I can sleep in the room for District Twelve’s mentor instead of sleeping in the special guestrooms. In the main hall meetings are held and breakfast, lunch and dinner is served.
Everyone is gathered there already when we arrive and Seneca Crane, the Head Gamemaker is giving us his welcoming speech.
“As you know you all will be given a catalogue with gifts that are selected especially for this arena, next to the usual gifts of food, water and weapons. In this year’s catalogue you’ll find a salve for tracker jacker venom, burn medicine and other medicine and supplies that will come in handy, all selected because of the hidden pods and possible mutations.” Seneca explains.
Every arena has hidden pods. Once activated, they’ll bring hell upon the tributes. The mutations
are even worse. They’re genetically enhanced creatures. My nightmares still bother me with the flesh eating squirrels I encountered in my own arena. It’s been twenty four years but they never leave.

Effie, next to me, is excited. “I bet we’ll get tons of sponsors this year,” she squeaks out, practically glowing. Before we get to sign them up though we first get a tour of the large Gamemakers control room where Seneca shows us the arena and points out some of the pods and what we can expect in terms of weather. When I see the arena I suck in my breath and at the same time try to keep my face unreadable. This arena is perfect for Katniss. Just perfect. With all her hunting experience she’s going to do well in here. There are trees everywhere and enough sources for food. I see rabbits, grooslings, squirrels, berries, herbs, and other greenery. At least she won’t grow hungry.

Peeta’ll not grow hungry as well, as long as he’s in the career pack he’ll have plenty of food. I catch myself thinking about him again. I have to stop that and focus on Katniss. I can only save one.

When Seneca is done explaining, we all go to our own rooms, where the Capitolites are already lining up. There are a lot of them lingering in front of the doors of One and Two. They are usually popular with the crowds, this year’s no exception. Four has a queue as well and so has Eleven. That must be because of the boy, Thresh. He’s huge and stands out as a favourite for these Games. But behind Eleven, in front of our door, that’s where the real queue starts. It seems as if at least fifty people have chosen Twelve to sponsor this year. At the sight of them Effie tears up. “Look at all those people, Haymitch,” she whispers. “This year’s going to be amazing!”

The long line of people renews the feeling of hope I’ve felt earlier this week. Sponsors can be a matter of life and death in these Games. If I could get Katniss a bow with all this money, that would be extremely helpful. But a bow is so expensive, even with all these people here it would completely deplete her account.

Officially the people can choose to either sponsor the boy or the girl, but none of the District Twelve sponsors are explicit about it. Both, is what they say, they want to sponsor both. This whole star-crossed lover angle that Peeta played has made people want to sponsor and save them together. Of course that last option is impossible, but the fact that they don’t choose makes it easier on me. I have the freedom to use all this money on Katniss.

It’s past midnight when the last people leave and I can finally rest. The mattress I ordered has come and I go to sleep. Wanting to be well rested tomorrow when the gong goes off. No such luck. The flesh-eating squirrels come to haunt me in my dreams and when I wake up in the middle of the night, all I want is a bottle of liquor. I forget about the tributes, the sponsors and the hope. All I know is those nightmares need to be chased away. And alcohol is what it takes. So I give in, walk to the main hall and take place at the empty bar. There’s a twenty-four seven service and the attendant isn’t surprised to see me. Probably recognizes me from last year. Silently he pours me a drink and I empty the glass in one swallow. “Refill,” I mumble. He obeys without comment. It doesn’t take me long to become completely inebriated. “What’s life? If not alcohol,” I say to the attendant. He shrugs noncommittally. “You don’t know the answer?” I shout out, “I’ll tell you. Life is nothing, all is nothing. It sucks.” I try to get up but fall from the chair. Two other attendants lift me up and drag me away. “What’s going on,” I slur, “Leave me alone, I need to go mentor my kids.”

“Not before you’ve slept off your inebriety,” a man’s voice says, it sounds vaguely familiar but I’m too far gone to recall its source. Next thing I know is I’m dumped on a bed. The soft blankets and feathery pillows carry me to oblivion.

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Effie is pulling on my arm. “Wake up now! Haymitch!”

“What?” I open my eyes and look at her painted face, hovering right in front of me.
“What were you thinking? Drinking on the day before the Games!” Effie shouts, “Our kids need us, the Games start in less than fifteen minutes and you have to get out of bed this instant!”

She stands next to the bed I was dumped in last night. Her hands defiantly on her hips. “I told the kids I would hold you down on gunpoint if necessary. And it’s very clear from the state you’re in now that it is necessary. So here I am.”

She pulls on my arm again and I sit up in the bed. “Where am I?” I say, not quite sure what’s going on.

“You’re at the Games Headquarters and the gong will go off in about twelve minutes.” Effie spits out, I’ve never seen her this angry or determined before, “So you have exactly two minutes to get out of that bed and come with me, or I’ll call someone to drag you out of it. Don’t think I won’t do it! I will!”

She holds up her index finger and with her other hand she pulls off the blankets. I’m still fully dressed, they didn’t bother to undress me. Slowly I get up and follow Effie to the main hall where we’ll watch the first hours of the Games together with the other mentors. In these hours we’re not allowed to send gifts, we have to wait for the initial fight to be over, that’s why we watch them with the entire group.

When we arrive the others are already gathered around the big screen. On it we see the tributes standing on the pedestals in the arena. Claudius Templesmith’s voice comes over the sound system. “Ladies and gentlemen, let the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games begin!”

From this moment on they have sixty seconds before the gong goes off. I forget about the alcohol still surging through my veins, all of a sudden I’m focused. These first few hours are so important. Will Katniss run? She’s stubborn and I’ve already seen the silver bow at the mouth of the Cornucopia. If she’s stupid enough she’ll try to get it.

When the gong sounds she remains standing on the pedestal for only a second and so does Peeta. Then both of them jump and run. He’s heading into the direction of the Cornucopia, she’s scooping up a bread and a piece of plastic. “Go, go,” I urge her on, but she doesn’t. Instead she runs further into the field to reach for an orange backpack.

A short struggle follows with another tribute but he gets killed by a knife from Two. “Go, Katniss,” I say, although I know she can’t hear me. She goes, holding up the backpack that catches the knife that the girl from Two throws, and disappears behind the tree line.

My eyes flit back to the Cornucopia. Peeta’s in the middle of the fight. I see he’s heading towards the tributes from Four. He’s almost there when Brandon gets an awl in his neck. Finnick, who’s standing beside me lets out a cry and clamps his hand on his mouth. The boy plummets on the ground. Peeta’s reached him now and kneels next to him. Trying to stop his bleeding with the bandages he still has around his hands. It’s no use, the boy is dying, but the result of Peeta’s action is that Marly takes him in their alliance.

The bloodbath goes on but Peeta’s in and Katniss is at a safe distance. By the looks of it, they both will make it through the first day. This is the best result I’ve had in years, both my kids still alive.

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It’s way past midnight when I wake from my nap and I feel the alcohol has left my body. I’m going to try to stay sober now. If only to keep Effie off my back. But even more because I want to see how my tributes are doing and if they need anything. We have enough money now to help them out if necessary. When I select District Twelve’s tributes on my additional screens I see Katniss is asleep in a tree and Peeta is roaming the lands with the careers, hunting for tributes. I’m holding my breath when they’re approaching Katniss’s tree. Fortunately she’s high up and hidden in a cloak of darkness, but she sees them and I recognize the confusion that registers on her face when she sees Peeta’s with them. “Keep it together, girl,” I whisper, “Don’t let the audience show what you feel about this.”

There are several screens in my office. The main screen shows me what the rest of Panem sees, on the other screens I can choose what I want to watch. One is scheduled to track Peeta, the other one tracks Katniss and I can man handle them to display someone else if I want. I can also see several
points of view from different camera angles. On the big screen Katniss’s face isn’t showing, they’re zooming in on the tributes at the foot of the tree. The camera that does show her face is so dark that I understand why the Gamemakers don’t show it. You can hardly see anything on it so it wouldn’t be very interesting. Everyone who’s watching can see she’s up there though, a red signal which says D12F is hovering over her tree. Every tribute has a tracker and the trackers are visible for us. They tell us the district and the sex of the tribute. District Twelve, Female.

Dawn is approaching, the careers move away from Katniss’s tree and she jumps out of it. Now she’s on the big screen. I see her cock her head to the side and smile straight into the camera as if she knows where it is. “That’s my girl,” I mumble, suddenly proud of her for knowing how to play the audience so well. Katniss is on the run again, Peeta’s heading back to the lake, where the careers made their camp. Time for breakfast.

Some of the other mentors are gathered at the breakfast table already. Chaff is there, happy that both his tributes survived the bloodbath. Seneca Crane is here as well, making the morning announcement. “There are twelve tributes still alive. Both from One, both from Two, the boy from Three, the girl from Four, the girl from Five, the boy from Ten, both from Eleven and both from Twelve.” He looks at our faces and beams happily, “Congratulations to all of you here on surviving the first day.”

I look around and see that the mentors from Six, Seven, Eight and Nine are already gone, hence the congratulations from Crane.

“Furthermore, today we’re going to wait on what the career pack will do. If nothing thrilling happens we will start activating pods, but that won’t happen before tomorrow. You’ll be notified beforehand so you’ll have the possibility to send gifts to your tributes if needed.”

He nods and leaves the room, back to the control centre. Chaff, next to me, gives a growl. “Stupid pods,” he mutters, “I don’t want them to harm my little girl.”

“Chaff, you have to begin to accept her imminent death,” I tell him, “What do you expect? That everyone will drop dead and she’ll live? The kid is not going to survive this.”

“Oh shut up, Haymitch,” Chaff retorts, “What do you know?” He gets up from his chair with such force that the chair falls backwards on the floor as he storms out of the room. Chaff gets too involved with his tributes, which will only hurt him even more when they get killed. I’m not stupid like him, I won’t let them crawl their way into my heart. Nonetheless I get up myself too and back to District Twelve’s room to see what my kids are up to today.

Katniss is searching for water. Peeta’s hanging around at the lake. It’s not really interesting and after a couple of hours of boredom I give in and start drinking again.

Effie arrives in the evening and immediately starts chiding me for my inebriated state. “What!” I shout at her, “The kids are doing fine without my help, let me drink, woman!”

“Katniss is not doing fine,” Effie complains, “She’s thirsty, you need to send her water.”

I look at the screen where I see Katniss secured high up in a tree. “She’s doing fine,” I say, “She doesn’t need water. Katniss is a hunter, she can find water herself. I’m not going to spend money on water. Look.” I point to the map of the arena. “Look where she is, it’s about half a day’s journey to reach that pond over there. Until then, she’ll manage.”

“But the temperature-” Effie begins.

“She’ll be fine, Effie, she’s not you. And she has a bottle of iodine in that backpack of hers. So leave me alone.”

“Fine,” Effie mutters, “But if by tomorrow evening she still hasn’t found it, you’ll send it.”

“I will, if necessary,” I reply. “But if she’s not even smart enough to find water, she won’t win these Games anyway and if that’s the case, I’m not going to waste gifts on her.

It turns out I’m right. The next day, about half way through the afternoon Katniss finds water. She almost passes out right next to the pond but manages to reach it. She’s badly dehydrated but back on track and I’m glad I didn’t give in and spent an enormous amount of money on something
she doesn’t need. The careers are busy with booby-trapping their supplies and in the evening they’re on the hunt again but the remaining tributes are spread wide over the arena and they don’t find anyone while the night progresses. I know the Gamemakers won’t wait long with activating pods now. In the dead hours of the night we get the signal that there will be a forest fire launched accompanied with firebombs.

I’m glued to the screen where I see Katniss running for her life, attacked by the firebombs. “Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, burns on.” Claudius Templesmith’s voice comes as a voice over to comment on what’s happening. “Oh shut up,” I mutter, “Wait until she sets you on fire.”

Peeta and the careers are on the run too but they’re close to the stream and emerge themselves in it. Peeta’s relatively unscathed but Katniss gets hit by a fireball, leaving a gaping wound in her calf.

On my screen appears a suggestion for a gift. A computerized voice comes over the sound system, “Suggested gift for Katniss Everdeen: Burn cream. Costs, a 1000 dollars.”

I have that, I have more than that, but I’m reluctant to give it to her. What if something else comes along that’s more urgent? What if the careers find her and she’ll need something to defend herself? I decide to wait until the end of the day to see what happens and if she really needs it.
Part 2: The Games. Chapter 2: The Alliance

Chapter Summary

The Alliance is a reference to the alliance between Katniss and Rue which also results into an alliance between Chaff and Haymitch. But first Katniss needs to fight of the careers. And then what will Peeta do? And how will that affect the Games?

Chapter Notes

I don’t own THG

I doze off for a couple of hours but wake at the sound of hoots and yells coming from the screen. Katniss is scaling a tree while the whole career pack, Peeta included, has gathered at the foot of the tree. She’s about twenty feet up when she stops climbing and stares down at them. They won’t be able to reach her, she’s up so high. But they could find another way to get to her though, burn the tree or something. I’m anxiously biting my nails, hoping either Katniss or Peeta will come up with a good idea. The boy from Two starts climbing the tree, but as soon as he hauls himself up Katniss begins to climb higher. Two falls out of the tree when the branches can’t hold him anymore and now the girl from One tries it. Katniss is too high and the branches are too thin, One can’t come close enough to her. She tries shooting some arrows but she’s not capable of handling a bow. Finally the group gives up and starts to discuss other ways. Before they can come up with a good plan, Peeta stops them and suggests to guard the tree and deal with her in the morning. The career pack gathers round a fire and Katniss settles down too. Seeing the exhaustion in her face, I’m about to send her the burn cream when my eye falls on the signal that there’s another tribute nearby. D11F. According to her tracker she’s right there next to Katniss but I don’t see her. I’m squinting at the screen, I change the settings of my second screen to Eleven, Female. It’s only after I’ve done that I see her in the tree next to Katniss’s. Katniss herself sees her too, the girl points to something above her head. There’s a tracker jacker’s nest hanging high up in the tree where Katniss is sitting. I can see that they’re tracker jacker’s because the pod is highlighted on my screen. Options for medicine to help with tracker jacker stings are appearing below it. These animals are terrible, one sting can mean hallucinations for days. Luckily the smoke from the fire sedated them but I still fear for my girl. She doesn’t seem afraid herself though, instead she climbs higher up the tree and approaches the nest. What is she doing?

I’m watching intently when she takes out her knife and starts sawing the branch at the same moment the anthem begins. The anthem! I still have to send her burn medicine and this is the moment, no one’ll notice the parachute during the anthem. I order the medicine and the parachute lands on her sleeping bag while Katniss is still sawing the branch. Her plan is dawning on me now. She’s going to want to drop the nest on the careers! When the anthem is over Katniss stops sawing because it makes too much noise. The branch isn’t even half way through but she goes back to her stuff where she finds the parachute. She immediately unscrews the lid and tests the ointment.

“Oh, Haymitch,” I hear her whisper, “Thank you.”

I can’t help but grin at this expression of gratitude. Gratitude is something I’m not used to get.
It’s early in the morning when my alarm wakes me, dawn has just arrived. As soon as I open my eyes I fix them on the screen again. The careers are still asleep, the girl from Eleven is gone and Katniss has started sawing the branch again. If she manages to finish it before those wasps sting her to death, the nest will drop down on the careers. And on Peeta. At this moment I wish I could do something to warn him, but there’s nothing. The camera zooms in on the nest and I see some of the wasps are swarming out of it and start buzzing around Katniss. She gets a sting on her knee and I realize she needs to hurry before more of them come out. Finally the branch is cut through and the whole thing tumbles down to the ground where it cracks open like an egg.

Wasps everywhere. The six sleeping kids on the ground are awake instantly and start screaming. Peeta and a few of the others have the good sense to run away into the direction of the lake. But the girls from One and Four are overwhelmed by the tracker jackers.

Katniss practically jumps out of the tree and runs to a small pond where she submerges herself in the water. In the meantime the girls from One and Four are squirming but I know they won’t live. Both of them are already covered with large lumps caused by the wasps’ stings.

After five minutes Katniss gets up and starts moving. But instead of moving away from the tree she’s going back. “What are you doing?” I whisper. Tracker jacker stings will cause severe hallucinations and I’m afraid Katniss isn’t aware of the direction she takes. She arrives back at the tree and kneels down next to the girl from One. At that moment the cannon fires. On my screen the picture of the girl from One lights up. A large red line diagonal crossed over the picture. Gone. Katniss is pulling at the bow and it’s only then that I understand. She wants the bow. A second cannon fires. The girl from Four. Diagonal red line. Gone. In the mean time Peeta left the lake and is heading back to the tree. “What are you doing?” I whisper again. “What is wrong with these two kids.”

I see him trip over the body from the girl from Four while the boy from Two starts chasing him. “Here we go.” I say.

Katniss is pulled into some sort of hallucination. She sits next to the dead body, holding both the bow and the sheath of arrows in her hands, trying to arm the bow but she’s not coordinated anymore. That’s when Peeta crashes through the trees and comes to an abrupt halt right in front of her.

"What are you still doing here?" he hisses at her. "Are you mad?" He starts prodding her with the shaft of the spear. "Get up! Get up!"

Katniss slowly rises while he keeps pushing her. The boy from Two appears from the bushes and at that point Peeta shoves her away from him. "Run!" he screams. "Run!"

Katniss runs, and Peeta turns around to face Cato. This is it, I think, he did what I expected him to do. Protect Katniss and now, he’ll die. He can’t win against this monstrous muscled career tribute.

Katniss disappears out of sight, bumping into trees and she starts screaming as the hallucinations get the better of her. While I’m fixed on Peeta and Two on the main screen, I see Katniss’s screen from the corner of my eye, she falls into a small pit where she curls up and blacks out.

Peeta and Two are trying to fight each other but it’s clear they’re both affected by the venom. Peeta manages to slash at Two with a knife but he deflects it. Then Peeta bolts and Two starts the pursuit, screaming at him as he goes. “I’ll kill you, you monster!”

The guy has totally lost it, but unfortunately he does catch up with Peeta and stabs him in his leg. Peeta cries out in pain and I’m thinking Two will end it now. But he doesn’t. He looks down on him, shouting at him to die. Then suddenly he turns around and runs away. It must have been caused by the hallucinations, because there’s no logical explanation for it.

The main screen shows that Two’s running back to the lake. At the lake the three remaining tributes seemed to have passed out. Two himself doesn’t even make it to the camp but collapses at the tree line and lies still. On my own screen I see Peeta’s managed to crawl under some bushes and then it seems he loses consciousness as well.
Great. All of them out for who knows how long. The stings can still be deadly for either one of them, in any case it will take a while for anything exciting to happen again.

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In the main hall I say goodbye to Finnick. Both his tributes are dead so he’s going back to Four for the time being. He will escort the coffin of the girl, together with the other mentor from Four. He won’t stay away too long though. At the end of the Games he needs to back here to attend the final interview with the victor. And after that, I’m sure Snow has still a lot of people lined up to spend some precious time with him, probably night time.

“Thanks for the help with the career pack,” I tell him.

“Sure, no problem,” he mutters, defeated. “It didn’t do you much good though, now that he’s stabbed.”

“I know,” I say, “But he saved the girl.”

Finnick looks at me quizzically. “Did you know that was going to happen?” he asks.

“I hoped for it.” I tell him, “He’s in love with her.”

“He told us that, but so much so that he’s willing to die for her?”

“Apparently.” I shrug.

“Amazing, you don’t see that often,” Finnick says, “Let’s hope she wins then. What’ll she do with the bow?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” I say dismissively.

In the hall everyone is enthusiastic because of the recent turn of events. Especially the escorts who, because they’re all Capitol citizens, are giddy with excitement. My star-crossed lovers are the talk of the day. The escort from District One comes towards me and throws his arm around my shoulder. “I can’t believe he saved her, did you see that?” he says to me, “I wish they could both live, and be together forever. That would be a twist!”

I shake my head and take his arm from my shoulder impatiently.

“As if that’s going to happen.” I say. “We all know only one of them can come out alive.”

“Says who?” says the escort, “Wouldn’t it be fun if they changed the rules! I’m going to suggest that to Seneca!”

“You go and do that,” I say and turn away from him. Capitol people are ridiculous.

Chaff and I have a drink together the next day. Nothing much is happening in the arena. Both my kids are still pretty much out of it and so are the careers. Chaff’s kids are doing fine.

“Did you see Thresh?” Chaff asks me, “He has gone into the fields and found so much edible stuff there. He’s eating all day, even gaining weight. It’s amazing. He’s found corn and started roasting it over a fire. I don’t even have to send him any sponsor gift.”

“Yeah, yeah, wonderful,” I mumble, not really caring.

“And Rue is doing so good too,” Chaff continues, “She helped Katniss out with that nest, you know.”

“I know, I’ve seen it,” I tell him impatiently. “Can we talk about something else than those stupid Games already.”

***

“Katniss has found Rue,” Chaff’s head comes around the door of my room, his eyes sparkling. “They made an alliance with each other!”

“Really,” I ask, just waking up. It’s early evening and on my screen I see Katniss with the little girl from Eleven chatting around a fire. “What are they doing?” I ask.

Chaff enters the room and laughs. He repeats himself to make sure I get it this time. “An alliance between our girls! Isn’t it great?”

“Hmm,” I mutter. Alliances are terrible. While they can help you at some point in the Games, everyone knows they’ll never last. And how will you end them? By killing the other person? I don’t see that happening with these two. I also don’t understand Katniss, what good would this
girl do her? She can’t fight, she has no sponsors. Despite the fact that she can take care of herself she’s practically useless.

Chaff and I watch together while the girls eat and talk. On my other screen I see Peeta’s hiding behind a big rock and just lays there. I wish I could do something for him. But I’ve chosen Katniss and she has the better odds. Especially now that he’s wounded, probably fatal.

They’re done with their dinner now and start climbing a tree where they settle for the night. After the anthem the two of them have an interesting discussion that starts with the night vision glasses.

"I wonder who else got a pair of these," Katniss says.

"The Careers have two pairs. But they've got everything down by the lake," Rue answers. "And they're so strong."

"We're strong, too," Katniss says. "Just in a different way."

"You are. You can shoot," Rue says. "What can I do?"

"You can feed yourself. Can they?" Katniss asks.

"They don't need to. They have all those supplies," Rue says.

"Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?" Katniss say. "I mean, it's the Hunger Games, right?"

"But, Katniss, they're not hungry," says Rue.

"No, they're not. That's the problem," Katniss agrees, "I think we're going to have to fix that, Rue."

Chaff next to me bursts out laughing. “Those girls,” he says, “They’re going to turn these Games around. Mark my words.”

“Right. What on earth can those two do?” I ask.

“It seems they want to take out the supplies of the careers,” Chaff points out.

“Sure, I bet they’ll manage to do that with those mines. Anyway, they’re going to sleep now,” I say, “So let’s drink.”

***

The next day it becomes clear that Katniss indeed plans to attack the careers. She doesn’t know about the mines though, so how will she solve that problem? While she and Rue concoct a plan, Peeta is busy making himself invisible. He buried himself in mud and twigs at the riverbank and is covering his tracks. When he’s done, the only sign that he’s still there is the flickering D12M above the ground. Only visible on screen of course. If someone passes him in there, there’s no way they’ll see him. I can’t help but wonder how long he’ll live. And what it’ll do to me once that cannon goes off. I feel a stab of pain in my chest at the thought of his death and I hit myself on the head for letting him in. I thought I learned from my mistakes. Don’t let them in. They’ll die and you’ll be far worse off than before. One step forwards, two steps back.

Chaff spends this day with me. Thresh doesn’t need his help, he’s doing fine, he assures me, and we settle on watching Katniss on one screen and Rue on the other. I’ve resigned to the fact that Peeta will just lie at that riverbank until he dies. He’s wounded and in a bad shape and I can’t watch him anymore. Effie, who came by this morning was muttering that it was against the rules for Chaff to be here and that I was wrong to forget about Peeta. “I can’t save them both,” I shouted at her in a sudden rush of anger. She looked at me with such disdain that I almost threw a glass at her head. Luckily for her she decided to leave at that point.

Katniss has reached the tree line. The careers have run off to check out the smoke, caused by Rue’s fires, so she can go in and check out the pile of supplies. I hope she’s smart enough to sense there’s something wrong. Suddenly the girl from Five comes running towards the pyramid from the woods. She’s hopping around the mines and reaches the pile safely.

“She certainly figured it out,” the voice of Claudius Templesmith comments.

Katniss isn’t stupid. I see her watching the girl intently and she’s putting two and two together.
“It’s mined,” she whispers. Five disappears into the woods and several minutes after that Katniss steps out on the grass and raises her bow.
The first arrow tears the side of the burlap sack with apples. The second widens the hole. I’m grasping Chaff’s hand in anticipation. “She’s going to do it!”
The third arrow flies. The burlap is ripped from the bag and the apples are spilling over. They hit the ground and trigger the mines, the earth starts shaking as the mines explode and Katniss is flying backward into the air.
“She did it!” I slap Chaff on the shoulder and jump up. “I can’t believe she actually did it!”
The explosion is so loud that everyone in the arena can hear it. We see Thresh stand up and look around over the fields. Peeta’s eyes fly open, unmistakably blue in the mud. The girl from Five climbs a tree, clearly scared. Rue does the same, but she seems more relieved than scared, probably because she suspects Katniss did this.
The careers, who were just checking out the second fire, turn around and start running back to their camp. Rue, high up in a tree, watches them pass and we see she has trouble holding in her laughter. While the careers approach the lake, Katniss disappears just on time, hiding under a bush. The careers are going berserk, the boy from Two naturally blames the boy from Three, who created the booby trap. He kills him so fast, that if you’d have blinked your eye at that moment, you’d have missed it. We watch him shout out in anger while the other two try to calm him down.
“It’s time for the interviews,” says Chaff, next to me, “There are only eight of them left. Both our tributes made it to the top eight, Haymitch.”
“I think this is the first time for me,” I say.
“Me too!”
Effie comes in to tell us the television crews have already arrived in the districts. “The interviews will be aired soon,” she tells us.

Night falls, the anthem comes and the tributes get to see who died. The boy from Ten this morning and the boy from Three in the afternoon. The careers start their hunt now that they know the person who blew up their food is still alive. Their hunt is uneventful and so is everything else that’s going on. The other tributes are all asleep, high up in trees or hidden somewhere else.
Chaff and I watch the interviews in the main hall with the others. Katniss’ mother and sister come off as shy but lovely people. They’re happy that Katniss is still alive but don’t have much to say about the star-crossed lover angle. Thankfully, they don’t dispute it either, knowing that would only hurt her cause. Peeta’s father is doing great. Telling everyone that his son had a crush on Katniss since forever and how heart breaking it is that they’ll never get together. He’s playing the camera just right, showing us where Peeta got his skills from. The next person they interview is Katniss’ friend, Gale Hawthorne. But because he’s male and sullen and handsome they portray him as her cousin. Good thinking, although the boy himself seems uncooperative. It doesn’t matter, overall the interviews have done her case good.

***

Katniss is trying to get back to Rue, who’s still in a tree close to the second fake fire. She’s whistling the mockingjay tune to the birds. A sign they agreed upon together. During the night the careers have crossed her path and she had to hide. One of them had placed a net on the ground close to the second fire and Rue’s tree. Chaff is worried that she won’t notice. “She’s smart enough, right?” I say, “Why wouldn’t she notice?”
But she doesn’t, because after she climbs out of the tree she walks right into the trap. The net encloses itself on her and pins her to the ground. She starts screaming and Chaff lets out a yell.
“No!”
“Don’t worry,” I say, “Katniss is almost there, she’ll free her.”
But as I’m saying it we suddenly see someone else running in her direction. It’s the boy tribute from District One and he approaches the net from the other side. “Katniss!” Rue is frantic as she tries to free herself from the net. “Katniss!” she screams. Katniss hears her and breaks out in a run.
“Rue! Rue! I’m coming!”
They come crashing into the clearing at about the same time. One has approached Rue first, he lifts up his spear and throws, Katniss arms her bow at the same time, the arrow lands in his neck. He falls to his knees while Katniss arms her bow again and looks around hysterically, in search of the others, not knowing no one else is there. “Are there more? Are there more?” she shouts at Rue.

The boy from One dies as he yanks the arrow out of his throat and drowns in his own blood. The sound of cannon follows shortly after. The little girl lies curled up under the net, the spear buried in her stomach.

Chaff buries is face in his hands, “She’s not going to survive this,” he mutters. I look at him with a mixture of pity and a little bit contempt. He should not have cared, then it would not hurt. But it’s too late, he cares, it hurts, she’s dying.

Katniss is sitting next to the girl and starts to sing at her request. A District Twelve lullaby. After she’s done the mockingjays pick up the song and then the cannon fires. Rue’s face appears on our large screen. Both Chaff and I watch the screen in silence, the room laden with tension. There’s a tear rolling down his cheek. After a couple of minutes I give in and order a drink for both of us.

We watch Katniss dressing Rue in flowers and then she presses her three middle fingers to her lips as a final goodbye. It’s a typical District Twelve greeting, it means respect, it means saying goodbye to someone you love.

Chaff disappears from my room. Katniss is wandering around aimlessly and I set my other screen back to Peeta. He’s still lying motionless in his mud bank. “Suggested gift for Peeta Mellark: fever pills, Costs, 2500 dollars,” the computerized voice tells me. Gifts get more expensive further on in the Games. These pills won’t even help him that much, but their price is exorbitant. I ignore the suggestion, thankful that Effie’s not here. She’d disapprove.

Just before evening falls there’s a knock on my door. Myrthe, the female mentor from District Eleven, appears around the corner. “Haymitch?” she asks. “We have something for you.”

“What is it?” I ask.

She enters and Chaff appears behind her. Both their faces still show the grief they feel for the loss of their tribute.

“Our district has raised money for a gift for Rue,” Myrthe says, “We planned on sending it tonight. Now that she’s dead we want to give it to Katniss.”

“Why?” I ask, “What about Thresh?”

“Thresh doesn’t need it,” Chaff says, “We want Katniss to have it. As a thank you for the song and the flowers.”

“Okay,” I say, baffled by their suggestion. Districts don’t give gifts to tributes from other districts.

The gift is ordered, it’s a loaf of District Eleven bread. Thinking about what Peeta told us about the breads representing the districts, I’m sure Katniss will recognize and appreciate it. It arrives just before the anthem starts and to her credit, she acknowledges it. “My thanks to the people of District Eleven,” she says into the camera before she climbs a tree and settles down to sleep.

***

The main hall is buzzing with anticipation. There’s going to be an announcement that will have a huge impact. No one knows what it’ll be but rumours are it has something to do with my star-crossed lovers.

Today has been uneventful so far. Katniss is lethargic, Peeta’s still dying, while whispering her name in his feverish dreams. Thresh is in his field, minding his own business. The careers are fighting with each other about what to do, because their hunting has been unsuccessful for days now. Then there’s the girl from Five, who never shows up anywhere but hides in trees and steals food from others. All of it is getting boring.

But now things are going to change. Chaff and I gather around a table with the other mentors. Xander and Clare from two and the woman from Five, Manille. I dislike and distrust all three of
them.
Although, as mentors, it’s down to only the five of us, it’s still busy in the main hall. All of the
escorts are still here, some of the stylists too, and most of the Gamemakers have come out of the
control room to listen to Seneca’s announcement. I see Cinna talking to one of the Gamemakers.
Is that Plutarch Heavensbee? The one who they thought had rebel ambitions? I shake my head to
clear it, I can’t be bothered with something stupid like a rebellion now, I’m too occupied with my
own Games. I have to find a way to get Katniss back on track. She’s so upset by Rue’s death and
acts way too careless for my taste.

Seneca finally arrives and tells us the news. It’s beyond anyone’s expectations and receives hoots
and yells from the people in the hall. I sit speechless in my chair, not able to really believe it. Then
Seneca repeats the news, and I have to accept it’s real. “There’s going to be a rule change. Two
tributes can win this year. If they’re from the same district. We’ll be announcing this to the tributes
after the anthem tonight.”

I’d already given up on Peeta, but not anymore. Because now both can live.

Both of them can live.

Both of them can live.

Before I can stop myself, I call out Peeta’s name.
Chapter Summary

The rule change is announced and Haymitch has to coax Katniss to come up with a convincing atcs. He does that by communicating through his gifts and Effie turns out to be quite valuable for this as well.

Chapter Notes

Part 3 will consist out of 4 chapters instead of 2. There was too much to discuss for 2 chapters.

I clap my hands over my mouth, but the sound has already escaped. Chaff looks at me, his eyebrows raised in a question. Manille looks mad, probably because of the disadvantage she thinks this rule has put her in. Xander and Clare didn’t even notice me, they’ve started talking with each other, the excitement clear in their voices. They already feel secure that they’ll win this. Cato and Clove, the tributes from Two, are doing well. Even though Katniss blew up their food, they have enough sponsors and they’re not injured, like Peeta.

Peeta. I might have just called out his name, but I’m also pretty sure he’s almost beyond saving. Suddenly a wave of insecurity washes over me, by looking at the mentors from Two. Why this rule change? What will this do to Katniss? Won’t it weaken her position? My first guess is it has something to do with the star-crossed lovers. I remember the conversation I had with the escort from One, a couple of days ago.

Wouldn’t it be fun if they changed the rules! I’m going to suggest that to Seneca! Seems like Seneca liked the suggestion after all. But why? Because he likes the star-crossed lovers too? My mind reels, trying to understand this unexpected turn of events. Manille has gotten up and walks towards Seneca.

“This is so unfair,” she tells him, “My tribute is already in a disadvantage here, and now you even made it worse for her.”

“I don’t see how this can influence your tribute, Manille,” Seneca answers, “She’s always hiding, they’ll never get her. It doesn’t matter if there’s one or two of them. If they don’t get her, she’ll live.”

“But you’ll make sure something happens,” Manille says, “You may unleash mutations or activate pods.”

“So what,” Seneca says, “That won’t give her anymore disadvantage than it gives others.” He dismissively waves his hand at her and leaves the room, most of the Gamemakers follow him back to control. My eye catches Plutarch Heavensbee, who gives me a subtle wink. What on earth is that about?

A hand on my shoulder makes me jump out of my chair. “So, now that the rules have changed, what are you going to do?” Chaff asks me.

“Nothing,” I tell him, “First I have to wait and see what Katniss will do. Peeta can’t do anything, so it all relies on her.”

“But she’ll try to find him,” Chaff says.

“Probably,” I agree, although a small part of me wonders about it. She knows he’s injured. She
knows it’ll weaken her position. What will she do?
The time of the anthem is almost there so I hurry back to my room to watch how my kids take in
the news. After the anthem Claudius Templesmith’s voice booms through the arena.
“Congratulations to you, the six remaining tributes,” he says, “There has been a rule change in the
Games. Listen very carefully.” He is silent for a second, and then drops the bomb. “Both tributes
from the same district will be declared winners if they are the last two alive.”
I see the astonishment on all six faces as the camera of the main screen alternates between them.
Claudius Templesmith repeats the rule change and I watch closely as the news sinks in. Katniss,
high up in a tree, calls out Peeta’s name and then covers her mouth with her hand. Peeta, on my
other screen, croaks out her name as well. Do they know that they play it just right? Both of them
come across like they’re madly in love with each other.

Night falls and my kids go to sleep. Cato and Clove start hunting again, they’re excited about the
current shift in the Games, got a nice gift of food from their sponsors and are celebrating. While I
watch them roaming the lands I sink back in thought.

Why? That is the main question that keeps coming back to me. Why did Seneca order this rule
change. I can’t help but think it has something to do with Katniss. Dressing Rue in those flowers,
giving her that District Twelve greeting. And then the bread from District Eleven. Something
that’s uncalled for. How will this be perceived in the Districts? All of it smells like rebellion. And
now she’s going to have to team up with a dying boy, which will weaken her position. So is this
the way for the Gamemakers to get rid of her? Or…

Or they really do like the star-crossed lovers angle and want to spice up these Games with this
alteration.
The thing is, these options complement each other. They can play out the love story for all it’s
worth and also hope Katniss gets killed because of it.
My thoughts are dark, I know. But I have to consider all possible options. I’m guessing Katniss’s
actions so far have some impact on the districts, at least on District Eleven. And if there’s
something the Capitol doesn’t want, it’s stirrings in the districts. Now that they’ve weakened
Katniss’s position, her chance of survival lessens and that may help the Capitol to repress these
stirrings. It’s not something I can be bothered with now though, I have to work out a strategy that
can save my tributes. Because of course now I am determined to save them both. They may want
her dead, but I will do whatever it takes to keep that from happening.
First thing on my list is to get a good night of sleep and wait for the morning to see what Katniss is
going to do.

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Effie appears early in the morning, yesterday she already congratulated me, beaming with
excitement. I brushed her aside, not able to bring up the patience to deal with her then. But now I
let her in the room and even apologize to her for yesterday. She smiles and says it’s okay. “I still
can’t believe they did this,” she tells me, “Don’t you think it’s amazing! But what will happen to
Peeta? I told you to send him gifts, and see how he’s doing now. Can’t we give him something?”
“No,” I say, stopping her rambling. “I’m going to wait until Katniss finds him. And it’s too
expensive now to send him anything that’s worthwhile.”
“But we’ve got so many extra sponsors now with the rule change,” Effie says.
“I know, but we have to spend the money wisely,” I say impatiently, “Just leave it to me, Effie, I
know what I’m doing.”
Effie gets up and points to the screen. “Look, she’s on the move!”
She’s right, Katniss has left her tree and is moving fast, heading to the stream. “Good thinking, sweetheart.” I
mutter.

Effie and I watch the screen with anticipation. We see that Katniss doesn’t let us down. It takes
her less than an hour to reach the spot where Peeta’s hidden. And here’s the proof of how good his camouflage really is, because she doesn’t see him. He has to make known to her that he’s there, but we’re not sure if he’s even conscious and aware of her presence, so close by now. A small flutter of his eyes gives us the answer, much to our relief, but she still hasn’t seen him. Effie places her hand on mine and squeezes it. “Oh Haymitch,” she gets out. “Shh,” I say, wanting to miss nothing. Just when I’m about to think she’s going to move further, Peeta finally speaks up. “You here to finish me off, sweetheart?” I give a small smile at him calling her that. Katniss herself jumps around at the sound of his voice, and still she sees nothing. She’s surveying the ground meticulously, and eventually starts whispering his name. He doesn’t react and I must say, if it wasn’t for the D12M hovering above his head, we wouldn’t have seen him either. Finally he says something again and then opens his eyes, unmistakably blue in the mud. Katniss seems genuinely happy to have found him. More than happy. What makes her tick, I wonder. What is it that draws her to him? Not that it matters now, what matters is how he’s really doing and what their chances are. We watch Katniss take care of him, undressing him, washing his clothes, treating his wounds, while he manages to get out a couple of jokes. Impressive as that may be, he’s not doing well. He refuses to eat, even though she practically forces the food on him. When she examines the wound in his leg I see it’s not looking good. A deep gash, pus oozing out of it. Katniss is having trouble, she has no idea what to do with it. Eventually she wraps it up and then asks him for his shorts to wash them. “Here, cover yourself with this and I’ll wash your shorts,” she says while she hands him the backpack. “Oh, I don’t care if you see me,” Peeta answers. “You’re just like the rest of my family, I care, all right?” she says and turns her back to him. “You know, you’re kind of squeamish for such a lethal person,” Peeta says while Katniss is cleaning his shorts. “I wish I’d let you give Haymitch a shower after all.” I see Katniss wrinkle her nose at that while I try to remember when Peeta gave me a shower. Was it on the train? I must have been too drunk to remember. “What’s he sent you so far?” Katniss asks. “Not a thing,” Peeta answers, “Why, did you get something?” “Burn medicine,” she says as if she’s ashamed. “Oh, and some bread.” “I always knew you were his favorite,” Peeta says. A wave of guilt rushes through me while listening to their conversation. Guilt for leaving him to his own devices. For letting him bleed to death in that mud bank. And does he actually think I prefer that sullen girl over him? “Please, he can’t stand being in the same room with me,” I hear Katniss say. “Because you’re just alike,” Peeta mutters. He’s right. We are alike. Natural survivors, where he is clearly the better person who’s willing to give his life for someone else. There’s no greater love than that. What does that make us, Katniss and me? I guess we’re only human. I’m pondering over Peeta’s words as the day continues. Katniss and I are just alike. That must mean that I can come to know what’s going on inside her head. As I watch them stumble to a cave, where they’ll spend the night, I think I’ve found it. She’s aware that she has to play this star-crossed lover angle, but she won’t be good at it because she’s not willing to open up. Not when the whole country is watching. What she really feels for the boy is irrelevant, because she won’t want to show it. So I have to let her know that she has to put on an act, has to present herself as madly in love with him, no matter what she really feels. He’s already there and will romance this up as best as he can, but he can’t do it alone. He’s very sick, dying even. His tracker tells me his temperature has run up to 104, which is crazy high. Katniss has to work with him on the romance and on top of that we’ll have to find a way to break his fever, clearly the fever pills Katniss is feeding him aren’t working and he refuses to eat. I take the catalogue from the table and start to browse through it aimlessly, trying to come up with
an idea. Effie looks over my shoulder, “What are you looking for?” she asks. “I’m not sure, something that will ramp up the romance,” I say, “Something for Peeta. Any thoughts?”
Her long red polished nail tabs on a page with several soups. “He’s not eating, he needs something warm that’ll stay down, it can’t be too heavy. And salty, he needs the salt. I’m thinking this pot of broth?”
“That’s a great idea,” I say, “She has to feed him, because he will be too weak to do it himself. Good thinking, Effie!”
She smiles at me, “I’m not as useless as you think I am.”
I ignore that comment and make the order but wait for the right moment to send it. Katniss needs to know I’m telling her something with this gift. Like when I refused to send her water because she almost found it.

While Katniss is trying to cover up the entrance from the cave, Peeta is staring at her like she’s some sort of goddess.

“Katniss,” he says. “Thanks for finding me.”
Katniss gives up on the camouflage and crouches down next to him, brushing his hair from his forehead. I can tell she feels he’s too hot, the concern is clearly visible on her face.
“You would have found me if you could,” she replies.
“Yes. Look, if I don’t make it back - ” he begins.
“Don’t talk like that. I didn’t drain all that pus for nothing,” Katniss interrupts him.
“I know. But just in case I don’t - ” he tries to continue.
“No, Peeta, I don’t even want to discuss it,” Katniss says and I hear the ferocity in her tone. She won’t let him die, she’ll do whatever it takes. I feel relieved, because I sense a small flicker of hope again, that between the two of us, we might be able to get him out of there alive.
“But I - ” he insists.
Finally Katniss decides on giving the audience what it wants. She leans forwards and stops his words with a kiss. It is way too chaste and too short, but it’s better than nothing.
“You're not going to die. I forbid it. All right?” she says when they break apart.
“All right,” he whispers.

“You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart.” I mutter at seeing the halfhearted kiss, “The boy’s dying. Give me something I can work with!”
No one will be convinced by this so she really needs to liven it up. I decide to give her the broth now. She’d expect medicine, which I can’t afford, but this will give her a message. One kiss equals one pot of broth.
Katniss steps out of the cave and I push the button for the order. The parachute arrives and she’s eager to open it. The disappointment shows in her expression, but I see it got her thinking and I believe she got the message.
She hurries back inside to bring the broth to Peeta. “Peeta!” she says and her voice has taken on a special tone. Already she’s making more of an effort. She kisses him awake and he gives her a smile, as warm as sunshine. The boy’s doing a great job.
Katniss holds up the pot. “Peeta, look what Haymitch has sent you.”

She coaxes the soup into him, which takes her a long time. He’s really sick and it worries me. Effie voices my concern, “It’s not looking good, Haymitch.”
“I know,” I answer, “But what can we do? We don’t have the resources to help him.”
“I don’t understand,” Effie gives a deep sigh. “We’ve got so much more money now. People keep donating and more is coming in every hour.”
“It’s still not enough. He needs high tech stuff which costs too much.”
As the night continues we see Katniss trying to do what she can, while Peeta’s temperature only seems to rise. When it’s about 106 I almost give in and send her some extremely expensive pills. But they won’t do enough and will only deplete my account. I decide to wait for morning and see where we are then.
Katniss and Peeta aren’t well concealed in that cave and that worries me. If you compare it to yesterday, when Katniss was safe high up in a tree, her position is really weakened. But on the other hand, Peeta’s doing considerably better when you weigh this against dying alone in a mud bank.

Come morning Peeta’s fever has broken, his temperature dropped to 103 and I decide to catch up on my sleep. I have just a few hours before sponsors will arrive in the Headquarters. Between twelve and two each day rich Capitolites come to donate money. Most of them already made up their minds on who to sponsor, but there’s always a few people who doubt. Today I’m determined to convince them to choose my kids. I need the money for a cure for Peeta. It will require an enormous amount so I have to be at my best for them.

At noon my alarm sounds and after a quick check on my kids, Katniss is asleep and Peeta just sits there, watching her, I hurry to the main hall. It’s packed with people who are eager to donate their cash. I have some good talks and bring in a rather large sum of money but it’s hardly enough. At two I go back to my room, dispirited. Peeta and Katniss’s situation is unchanged so I take a drink and lie down on the mattress to sleep some more.

It’s late in the afternoon when Effie wakes me. “You have to see this,” her voice sounds extremely worried. “It’s bad, Haymitch. He has blood poisoning.”

My eyes fly to the screen where I see Katniss and Peeta in their cave. She’s taken off the bandage from his leg and I instantly see that Effie is right. Red streaks are crawling up his leg, indicating his blood is infected. There’s nothing I can do to fix this and unless something drastic happens, he is beyond saving. I take in a deep breath and try to remain composed. I feel a sharp stab of pain in my heart and I realize I’m too far in. I’ll be heartbroken when he dies. This realization makes me furious at myself, and I lash out at the glass of liquor standing in front of me. It flies through the room and Effie gives a yelp at my sudden outburst.

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The gong sounds, telling us there will be an announcement in the main hall. Effie and I get up and walk to the hall together. The other mentors have already arrived. Seneca is there and as soon as we enter he tells us what the occasion is.

“Good afternoon to all of you. I’ve called you here because there’s going to be a feast. And this won’t be an ordinary feast. Normally feasts contain food, but only one of the tributes really needs that.” With that Seneca casts a look at Manille. “The others don’t need it, but they do need something else. So this is the idea. We’re going to launch a table with four backpacks on it, tomorrow at sunrise. For Two, we will give two bodysuits which will provide security against any kind of attack. Arrows, knives, swords, mutts. They won’t make a dent in it. For Five, several loafs of bread, fruit and a woolen blanket. For Eleven, the pack will consist of a knife, a sword and a special weapon that will be able to cut through the suits from Two. For Twelve, you will find a hypodermic needle containing the antibiotics for blood poisoning. The doctor assured me, once inserted, it will cure him within eight hours.” Seneca looks at me intently before he concludes, “I surely hope all of your tributes will attend. We will make the announcement in an hour. That will be all.”

A cure for Peeta. So he can live. Katniss will want to go and save him. But it will also place her in great danger. I don’t think the girl from Five will pose a threat, but those from Two… and then there’s Thresh. Sure, Chaff’s my friend, but not when it comes to these Games. Thresh is a big threat to Katniss and I worry about her. On the other hand, not going isn’t an option and I know she will feel the same.

I’m proved right when the feast is announced and Katniss and Peeta start an argument about it. She wants to go but he doesn’t want her to risk her life for him. His reaction is not surprising to me but it’s unacceptable. She has to go. She tries to mollify him by saying she won’t go, but he’s not stupid and she’s not that good of an actor.
“You’re such a bad liar, Katniss. I don’t know how you’ve survived this long.” Peeta says and then he starts mimicking her voice, “I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You’re a little cooler though. Of course, I’m not going.” Peeta shakes his head. “Never gamble at cards. You’ll lose your last coin.”

Katniss shows her true colors and snaps at him, “All right, I am going, and you can’t stop me!”

“I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to the Cornucopia, but if I’m yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I’ll be dead for sure,” he tells her.

“You won’t get a hundred yards from here on that leg,” she points out.

“Then I’ll drag myself, you go and I’m going, too,” he says as he stares her in the eyes, challenging her.

“What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?” she says desperately.

“I won’t die. I promise. If you promise not to go,” he pleads.

It’s ridiculous and pointless but he won’t budge. He’s stubborn enough. Katniss finally gives in and promises that she won’t go to the feast, but I don’t believe her. She still wants to go. But how? He’s crazy enough to really follow her and that would be disastrous. As I watch her feed him some soup I take a large sip of my drink and wish it could carry me into oblivion. With this thought a plan comes to mind. It’s not very decent, but I’m beyond caring. She needs to go to that feast, that’s all I can think about. So after she’s done feeding him his soup and heads out of the cave I sent her a gift. Knowing she’ll understand what I want with it.

When she opens the vial and tastes the syrup she’s furious. Furious because this won’t heal him. She almost throws it away. Just in time she realizes the worth of the sleep syrup. It will knock Peeta out for a whole day and that means Katniss can go to the feast without him coming after her. She mashes the syrup with some berries into a jam and goes back to the cave to feed Peeta the mush. At first he swallows obediently but he recognizes the taste.

“They’re very sweet,” he tells her after a few bites.

“Yes, they’re sugar berries. My mother makes jam from them. Haven’t you ever had them before?” Katniss says, and for the first time her lies are convincing, at least for him. “No, but they taste familiar. Sugar berries?” he asks.

“Well, you can’t get them in the market much, they only grow wild,” she says and gives him another spoonful of the stuff.

“They’re sweet as syrup,” Peeta says and with that he puts two and two together. His eyes widen as he realizes he’s being played. “Syrup.”

Katniss forces him to swallow the last bite and although he attempts to vomit the stuff up, he’s too late as it drags him down into a deep sleep.

“Who can’t lie, Peeta?” Katniss whispers as she wipes a strain of berries from his chin.
Part 3: The Victor. Chapter 2: The Feast

Chapter Summary

Katniss has drugged Peeta and goes to the feast. Haymitch chats and drinks some with Chaff. We also come to know what happened between Cato and Thresh. And what do Katniss and Peeta have to do before Haymitch sends them the food they need so desperately.

I’m anxious. I’m afraid. I’m worried sick. Katniss has left Peeta early in the morning and has positioned herself in the underbrush across from the Cornucopia. The girl from Five has hidden herself inside of the horn, which is extremely clever. Thresh is hiding in the field, he has a pair of spectacles, which he uses to scan the field. I haven’t a clue what the tributes of Two are thinking. Clove has concealed herself in the bushes opposite from Katniss, but Cato is far away from the Cornucopia, searching through the trees. What on earth is he looking for? Maybe he expects Peeta? I have no idea and their plan of action makes no sense to me. I do think it’s better for Katniss that he’s far away, but I’m scared for her nonetheless.

As soon as the table arrives the girl from Five sprints out of the Cornucopia, takes her own bag and bolts. I see the frustration in Katniss’s face because the girl outsmarted her. “Don’t be bothered with that, Katniss,” I say to the screen, “Just go.” And she goes.

She sprints fast, faster than I expected. But Clove has spotted her and jumps from behind the bushes. Her knife flies through the air, Katniss deflects it with her bow and shoots at her. The arrow pierces Clove’s left arm, and she has to stop to remove it. Katniss has rearmed her bow and reached her backpack now, but Clove’s second knife hits target. The gash in Katniss’s forehead is pouring out blood, blinding her, filling her mouth and she’s unable to take meticulous aim. Clove slams into her and pins her to the ground. There she goes. Katniss is no competition for Clove, who has easily twenty pounds on her. Why did I send her that sleep syrup? If I hadn’t done that, Peeta wouldn’t be asleep and that would’ve prevented her from going. But no, I wanted her to go and now I’m going to lose them both. Clove will kill her and Peeta will wake up alone tonight, knowing Katniss has died and he’ll follow her within a couple of days. I have some money left to send him something, food or pills, but nothing that can save him from the blood poisoning. He needs the needle in that small orange backpack in Katniss’s hand.

Clove takes her time, teasing Katniss with the knife. I can’t watch but at the same time can’t take my eyes from the screen. And then I see Thresh jumping out of the field and running towards the Cornucopia. The girls don’t notice him while he approaches them and hears Clove mention Rue. She’s just cut the corner of Katniss’s mouth when he grabs her from behind and throws her in the grass. I let out a yelp at this turn of events.

Thresh asks Clove about Rue and smashes her skull in with a rock, then he turns to face Katniss. She’s gotten into a standing position but doesn’t try to run or to arm her bow, she just stands there and stares at him.

“What’d she mean? About Rue being your ally?” Thresh asks her and Katniss tells him about the alliance, the food pyramid and how One killed Rue and she killed him. And how she sang for Rue and covered her in flowers. She even tells him about the bread his district sent her. When she’s finished talking she asks him to finish her off fast, but he doesn’t do it. He lowers the rock in his hand and points to her. “Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we’re even
then. No more owed. You understand?"

I understand. And so does Katniss. We know about owing and about debts and how some debts can never be paid back. I’m thinking back to my own Games, my pact with Maysilee Donner, who saved me from the careers, and how I’ll never stop owing her for that. My nightmares are still filled with her death, focusing on the fact that I couldn’t save her, couldn’t return the favor. And now Thresh feels like Katniss did what he should’ve done. Revenge Rue by killing her killer and he lets her go because of it.

She’s running now, the backpack on her back, trying to wipe away the blood from the cut in her forehead. Thresh has seized both the backpack from 2 and 11 and heads back to his field while Cato rushes towards Clove. The main screen focuses on him now, kneeling beside her. He takes her hand in his. “Clove, please,” he begs, “Please don’t die, don’t leave me alone. Please.”

This robot monster career is weeping next to the dying girl and I’m baffled at the sight of it. It reminds me again of the cruelty of these Games, even for careers, who think of it as an easy way to become rich but learn about the horrors the hard way. I have to turn away from the main screen because I can’t look at it, instead I watch Katniss running through the woods, crashing into the stream, trying to staunch the bleeding with the pair of socks she had on her hands. Then the cannon fires and Clove’s face appears on the main screen, with the familiar red diagonal line crossed over it. Cato gets up, wipes his face and repositions the spear in his hand. He looks around, almost indecisively staring at the trees and then at the field on the other side. It takes minutes before he finally decides on chasing Thresh. When he sets out in that direction I let out a deep breath, only now aware that I was containing it.

In the mean time Katniss has reached the cave, she’s on her knees next to Peeta, opens the backpack and without hesitation she slams the needle in his arm. Only after she pressed down the plunger she collapses like a ragged doll and loses consciousness.

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With both Katniss and Peeta out cold for the time being I get up and walk over to Chaff’s. He’s watching Thresh who made it safely back to his base camp. Cato is after him, but he’s covering unknown ground so he’s being extremely careful, not sure what kind of surprises await him in the long grass.

While Thresh is examining the packs and Cato seems to be lost, I thank Chaff for what his tribute did. “You don’t have to thank me,” Chaff replies, “I didn’t do anything, you know that. You’d have to thank him,” he nudges towards the screen where we see Thresh toss away the armors that were in the pack from 2, he tried one on but they were made for Cato and Clove and neither one fits him. He’s too big. After he’s cast them aside he goes to light a fire and pop some corn on it. “I might not get the opportunity to thank him,” I say, carefully. “Why not?” Chaff snaps at me, “Do you think he won’t make it?”

“I don’t know, that’s why I used the word ‘might’” I say, holding up my hands defensively. “He got his pack, he’s got the pack from Two. Cato is hunting him but he doesn’t stand a chance against him in his own grounds. So I’m sure he’ll be able to kill him and then it’s only that shrew from Five and your star-crossed lovers,” Chaff says, “And by the sight of them, I’m sure they won’t be much of a competition. Look at them!”

I look and see Katniss and Peeta are on the main screen now, only for a short while because they’re both still unconscious and that’s not very interesting to watch. The camera switches to the girl from Five who sits in a tree, quietly eating an apple and then goes back to Cato, searching the fields.

“You’re cranky today,” I tell Chaff, “Let’s have a drink.”

Chaff nods and I order a bottle of wine. We drink until the bottle is empty and a second one goes down as well. It’s already evening when I head back to my own room, slightly inebriated. But after years of training I know how to hold down my liquor. I see Peeta’s awake and busy cleaning Katniss’ head wound. His tracker tells me his temperature is back to normal. The anthem starts
playing and Clove’s face appears in the sky of the arena. This is the only information the other
tributes get, so they know who died. Peeta gets up and looks at Clove’s picture through a crack in
the cave. When she disappears he goes back to Katniss and continues to treat her. He’s clearly
upset by the state she’s in but also doing a lot better and since she’s still alive I’m confident they’ll
be fine. This feast went better than I could have hoped for. Both of them still alive and on the
mend.

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The Gamemakers announce a rainstorm. The rainstorm has a twofold reason. First, Seneca tells
us,, it will force our star-crossed lovers into some romantic action. Make the world believe in their
love by huddling together, kissing, having romantic talks about how much they love each other. I
wonder what will come of that, given the circumstances they’re in. But the rain will prevent them
from doing anything else.
The second reason is to target Thresh and Cato. They’re trying to pull them into a fight and for
some reason, which is unclear to me, the storm is going to help with that. Bets are placed and the
Capitol is buzzing with excitement over the possible outcome.
In the mean time somewhere during the day Katniss awakes, making both me and Peeta really
happy. Now it’s his turn to take care of her and he’s doing a good job, feeding her and rubbing
her feet warm. When she tells him about the feast I finally discover their shared history, and with
me the rest of Panem.

Katniss tells Peeta that Thresh let her go because then they would be even.
“He let you go because he didn't want to owe you anything?” Peeta asks in disbelief.
“Yes. I don't expect you to understand it. You've always had enough. But if you'd lived in the
Seam, I wouldn't have to explain,” Katniss says.
“And don't try. Obviously I’m too dim to get it,” Peeta replies with a shrug.
“It's like the bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that,” she tries to explain.
“The bread? What? From when we were kids?” Peeta says. “I think we can let that go. I mean,
you just brought me back from the dead.”
So here’s their connection, apparently he gave her bread. I wonder what actually happened there.
“But you didn't know me.” Katniss says, “We had never even spoken. Besides, it's the first gift
that's always the hardest to pay back. I wouldn't even have been here to do it if you hadn't helped
me then. Why did you, anyway?”

“Why? You know why,” Peeta says but Katniss shakes her head. “Haymitch said you would take
a lot of convincing.”

“Haymitch?” Katniss asks. “What's he got to do with it?”
“Nothing,” Peeta says, clearly exasperated. I shake my head at the screen, is the girl stupid or
something? She really still doesn’t know his true feelings towards her. I hope she won’t forget to
act in love.

The rain continues and Cato and Thresh have found each other in it. They’re fighting and both of
them receive wounds. When Cato gets stabbed in his arm he flees and Thresh, who seems
exhausted by the fight, doesn’t follow him. At least for now, we all have been given a small
despite.
I have a drink with Chaff again, who seems in a better mood. Thresh is wounded but it’s nothing
too bad and Chaff is positive he’ll win this fight.
In the evening after the anthem I go back to my room to see how my kids are doing. They sit
huddled close to each other, talking about food.
“I wonder what we'd have to do to get Haymitch to send us some bread.” Peeta says.
“Well, you have to start entertaining us,” I tell him, “You two are boring.”

Somehow his remark has woken up Katniss though, because she takes his hand in hers and says
in a mischievous voice, “Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me knock you out.”
“Yeah, about that.” Peeta answers her, “Don't try something like that again.”
“Or what?” she asks.
“Or... or,” he’s searching for words, trying to find an argument. “Just give me a minute.”
What's the problem?” she says and a smile plays on her lips.
“The problem is we're both still alive. Which only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing,” Peeta answers.
“I did do the right thing,” Katniss says self-righteously.
Peeta suddenly bursts out, “No! Just don't, Katniss! Don't die for me. You won't be doing me any favours. All right?”
Katniss is startled at his outburst at first, but then she says, “Maybe I did it for myself, Peeta, did you ever think of that? Maybe you aren't the only one who... who worries about... what it would be like if...”
She stammers and stops talking.
“Come on girl,” I say, “Give it up already. Talk.”
She’s not saying anything though and Peeta has to take over. “If what, Katniss?”
She looks away and mutters, “That's exactly the kind of topic Haymitch told me to steer clear of.”
“Are you serious!” I'm practically yelling at her, “Are you freaking kidding me?”
Fortunately Peeta saves the day.
“Then I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself,” he says as he leans in and kisses her.
It’s not good enough though. Katniss dropped the ball and this tame kissing won’t help much.
Katniss was right about using up the resources. The sleep syrup was expensive, we still have enough money to give them something to eat, but she has to work harder. I want her to open up, the audience wants more than just physical affection.

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After the kiss nothing interesting happens as they lay down inside of the sleeping bag and settle for the night. I’m cursing them under my breath for being lame when I see a stirring on the main screen. Cato has ambushed Thresh and is slashing at him with his sword. Thresh is unprepared and although he’s fighting back hard, Cato has the advantage now. Thresh manages to inflict another wound on Cato, but while his knife is cutting Cato in his arm, at the same place where he stabbed him before, Cato buries his sword in Thresh’s stomach. Both of them give a cry of pain. It’s hard to make out in the dark and with the heavy rain, what exactly is happening. They lie still on the ground and for a short moment I feel a flicker of hope that both of them are fatally wounded. But no such luck, Cato’s moving, crouching up as he examines his arm. Then he crawls over to where Thresh is lying. He’s breathing heavily and is not able to move. Cato’s sword still stuck in his stomach and the camera zooms in on it. The wound seems deadly enough. Cato must have reached the same conclusion as he sits back and breathes heavily in and out. He’s checking his arm again and wiping his face with his other arm. He’s soaked through and trough and seems to be a little dazed. Then suddenly he throws his head back and starts laughing. “Only three to go and then I’m coming home, mom!” he yells into the night. Then with one smooth motion he grabs the sword and pushes it through Thresh’s body, takes it out and stabs him in his heart. The cannon fires immediately, the sound muffled by the thunderstorm. Thresh’s face appears on my screen.

Slowly I get up and after I’ve checked on my kids, who are sleeping, I go over to Chaff. He’s drinking whiskey when I enter his room. “I’m sorry, Chaff,” I tell him solemnly. He shrugs as he finishes his glass in one swallow. Then he pours himself another glass and hands me one as well.
“I really hope they’ll win, Haymitch,” he says, “I hope both of them win although I won’t be surprised if...”
“If what?” I ask, suddenly cautious because of his tone.
“If nothing really,” he says dismissively, “I’m sure they’ll make it, if they can take out Cato.”
He starts packing his stuff in a bag. “I’m off to make a delivery, have to send one wooden box back to Eleven. I’ll see you at the finals here in the Capitol.”
We give each other an awkward hug and then he’s gone.

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The next day absolutely nothing interesting happens. Cato is tending his wounds, Five is hidden in a tree, doing not much more than napping. For my kids the same applies. I can’t blame them, with the rain still going on there’s not much they can do. But they are acting plain out boring now. Huddled together in the sleeping back. When Effie comes by to ask how they’re doing I let out my frustration. “Oh they’re doing fine,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm, “It won’t take long now before they bore all of us to death.”
“Don’t talk about them like that,” Effie chides me, “They can’t do anything in this weather and they’re hungry. You should send them some food, we can afford that.”
“They first have to give us something to work with.” I say.
“Okay, but I’m going to start assemble a dish,” Effie says, determined, “How about that lamb stew Katniss told us about?”
“Yeah sure, whatever.” I say. I don’t really care about what kind of food they get, as long as they play it right. But the lamb stew does sound like a nice touch.
It’s already evening when Katniss and Peeta start having an interesting conversation. He’s telling her about how he fell in love with her and she is slow on catching the truth in his words, as always. But he tells a detailed and convincing story and I can see it starts to dawn on her now. When he’s done talking, she says, “You have a... remarkable memory.”
He takes a strand of her hair and tucks it behind her ear, stroking her cheek while doing it.
“I remember everything about you,” he says. “You're the one who wasn't paying attention.”
“I am now,” she says.
“Well, I don’t have much competition here.”
Katniss swallows and bites on her lip, staring at the ground and I’m afraid she’s going to drop the ball again. “Say it! Say it!” I whisper, and as if she heard me she raises her head and says, “You don't have much competition anywhere.”
“Yes!” I call out, making Effie start, “That’s what I’m looking for sweetheart! Now Effie, order the food.”
Katniss leans in to kiss Peeta as the parachute lands next to their cave, the thump breaks them apart. Peeta steps out into the rain and hands the basket to Katniss. Once he’s back inside and they both look happily at the food, he says, “I guess Haymitch finally got tired of watching us starve.”
“I guess so,” Katniss answers, but I know she got the message. We think just alike.
Part 3: The Victor. Chapter 3: The Star-Crossed Lovers

Chapter Summary

Haymitch is watching the last part of the Games, that is about to begin. He has to do an interview and he reminisces a bit about his own Games, especially what happened after it with his family. After Cato dies they change the rules back, which is quite upsetting for Haymitch. What will happen now?

After Katniss and Peeta have eaten the stew, they start talking about his crush again but then all of a sudden their conversation lands on me.

“I’m sure that would thrill your parents, you liking a girl from the Seam,” Katniss says.

“Hardly. But I couldn't care less. Anyway, if we make it back, you won't be a girl from the Seam, you'll be a girl from the Victor's Village,” Peeta replies.

“But then, our only neighbor will be Haymitch!” Katniss suddenly blurts out. Apparently me being her neighbor is not something she looks forward to. Whatever. As if I'd enjoy watching that scowl on her face every day. To be honest, the idea of having them as neighbors is a bit worrying. I don’t know how comfortable I’ll feel, having them around all the time.

“Ah, that’ll be nice,” Peeta says, “You and me and Haymitch. Very cozy. Picnics, birthdays, long winter nights around the fire retelling old Hunger Games’ tales.”

Right. As if I’d ever want to spend a night with these two, let alone if we’d have to talk about the Hunger Games. I can think of better topics.

“I told you, he hates me!” Katniss says, but she’s laughing.

“Only sometimes.” Peeta retorts, “When he’s sober, I've never heard him say one negative thing about you.”

“He's never sober!” Katniss exclaims.

"That's right. Who am I thinking of?" Peeta says, “Oh, I know. It's Cinna who likes you. But that's mainly because you didn't try to run when he set you on fire. On the other hand, Haymitch. Well, if I were you, I'd avoid Haymitch completely. He hates you.”

“I thought you said I was his favorite,” Katniss says.

“He hates me more, I don't think people in general are his sort of thing,” Peeta says and I have to say he’s hit the nail with this one. Not about me hating him more, which I don’t, but about people not being my sort of thing. Because, let’s be honest, people suck most of the time. If you love them you’ll end up hurt because they either die or get killed or betray you. So better not do that. Better keep a safe distance.

There’s a knock on my door and an attendant enters. “Mr. Abernathy, you’re wanted in the main hall,” the man tells me, “They want to do an interview.”

It must be because of this wonderful conversation my kids are having, that they want to interview me. I don’t want to cooperate, but I don’t have much choice. So I get up and follow him obediently.

In the main hall a camera crew has appeared and a woman reporter with a bold, tattooed head shakes my hand. “Hello Haymitch, my name is Cressida and I’m going to do your interview.”

I act grumpy, I don’t want to do an interview, I want to be in my room and watch my kids. But I can’t escape this, because of them. People want to know more about them and I’m their number one source. So I have to play along.

Cressida asks me about how Katniss and Peeta were behaving in the days before the Games. And if I knew they were in love already. I tell her that I suspected it. How they’d blush and avoided eye contact. How I couldn’t be sure but that I wasn’t surprised about Peeta’s confession during the
interview. Of course I don’t tell her that I already knew he was going to say it, and I also don’t tell her that I have doubts regarding Katniss’s feelings for Peeta. I don’t know for sure what she feels, but I suspect it’s not as mutual as everyone thinks it is. These thoughts I keep to myself, I tell Cressida and the world that they’re a lovely couple, that I’m absolutely certain they’ll win this and that they’re going to live happily ever after. “I can already see them playing with their kids in the meadow,” I say.

When I head back after the interview, I see Katniss is sleeping, in the bag, curled up against Peeta, who’s sitting up and keeping watch. Not that it’s necessary to keep watch. Cato is too wounded to move at the moment. He’s still at Thresh’s camp, licking his wounds. I set my second screen on rewind, to watch the one and a half hours I just missed because of the interview. When I’m back to where I left off I realize they’re still talking about me, now they’re discussing my Games. “How do you think he did it?” Katniss asks.


“Haymitch. How do you think he won the Games?” Katniss says.

It stays quiet for a while before Peeta says, “He outsmarted the others.”

Katniss nods and so do I. I outsmarted the others alright. And I paid the price for it too. I don’t think Katniss and Peeta know that, unless their parents told them. How President Snow has ordered to kill my entire family and my girl. My girl. Laurene. Katniss looks just like her. Laurene told me exactly what Peeta just said, that I outsmarted the others. She said she was happy that I made it out of there but she was scared too, for the consequences. I thought that was nonsense, told her that too. “What can possibly happen?” I asked, “I won and I’m back and you and my family are going to come live with me in the Victor’s Village.”

“I hope so,” she answered. A week later she was dead.

It was poison. They’d put it in their food or in their drinks, I don’t know how. I wasn’t there, I had to do another interview. At that point I was sick and tired of interviews, I wanted to be left alone already, knowing I had to face it all again during the Victory Tour. I was so relieved when the interview was over and I could go home. I called out their names as soon as I walked through the door. In the silence that followed I knew instantly that there was something terribly wrong. They were still in the chairs they sat in when I left. Their bodies slumped, their heads laying on the table. I screamed. I shook their bodies. Begging them to wake up, to not leave me alone. But they were already gone.

President Snow sent me a letter of condolences, which arrived an hour later. An attendant came to my door, gave me the letter and took their bodies away without saying a word. I spent days in some sort of stupor, and when I could finally move again I went straight to the Hob, bought a couple of bottles of liquor and intended to drink myself to death. That didn’t work but I did found relief in alcohol. It was able to numb the pain a little. I could really use some now as well, truth be told.

While I’m lost in thoughts the anthem starts and Thresh’s picture appears in the sky. Katniss seems upset and even confesses to Peeta she’d rather see Thresh win than Cato. Peeta agrees with her but is pragmatic. “But this means we’re one step closer to District Twelve.” She has to toughen up. No one’s going to root for a tribute who whines over the death of opponents. When she cried for Rue it was endearing, but this is just weak. I’m silently thanking Peeta for coming off as a caring, loving boyfriend who comforts his girl when needed, but I also hope she’ll get over herself already.

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In the morning the rain has stopped and Katniss and Peeta prepare themselves to come out of their hiding place to hunt. There was no announcement of any pod or mutt, but I’m wondering how long this relative peace will last. Cato is still not recovered enough to start hunting the others,
maybe the Gamemakers will wait until he’s a little better. I wish I could tell Katniss and Peeta where he was so they could find him and kill him before he has the chance to recuperate, put on that armour and become almost invincible. Katniss and Peeta won’t hunt him down themselves though, they’re no warriors, no killers. They’ll defend themselves and each other but they won’t choose to attack.

Instead they intend to spend the day hunting and gathering food, but not before they have a good breakfast.

Effie enters the room with breakfast for us as well. “What’s going on?” she asks brightly.

“They’re having breakfast,” I simply state while I take a roll and start buttering it.

Katniss eats with her fingers and Effie, next to me, shakes her head at the sight of it. I grin at her and then burst out laughing when Katniss says, “I can feel Effie Trinket shuddering at my manners.”

Effie pouts a little, which makes me laugh even harder.

“Hey, Effie, watch this!” says Peeta. He tosses his fork over his shoulder and literally licks his plate clean with his tongue making loud smacking sounds. Then he blows a kiss out to her in general and calls, “We miss you, Effie!”

Effie tries to not let them get to her, but I see her cheeks burn red. “Well, well, well. At least they’re having fun,” she mopes. “Be it at my expense.”

“Oh Effie, loosen your corset,” I say, still smirking, “They’re just kids. Let them be. It’s not like they haven’t said anything about me, and you don’t see me getting all worked up over it.”

“No, no, I’m not worked up at all,” she says, but with such a high pitched voice that it makes me laugh again.

The mood changes when Katniss and Peeta leave their cave. We’re still in the Games and they have to watch out. Not for Cato, although they don’t know that, but there’s still enough to consider. Pods, mutts. Although those last ones only come with a warning from the Gamemakers for the mentors so I would have to know about it. In any case, the mood changes to serious.

While Katniss is hunting and Peeta’s busy gathering berries we watch the girl from Five sneak around. She’s really close to where Peeta is, but she’s practically soundless and he doesn’t notice her. He has spread some of the berries on a sheet of plastic and walks back to the stream where he found the bush. And that’s the moment the girl comes out from under the bushes and runs for the food. She takes a handful of the berries and some cheese and disappears again. Claudius Templesmith’s voice comes over the speaker, “Does she know how deadly they are? These poisonous berries? And do our star-crossed lovers know? If the three of them eat these berries, we can crown Cato today as Victor!”

Effie lets out a shriek at this news but I remain calm. Katniss is a trained hunter, she’ll know, she’ll recognize them. And as for Peeta, I’m thinking he’s loyal enough to not eat without her.

I’m proved right when I see Katniss examines the berries closely. At about the same time the girl from Five pops a few of them in her mouth about a hundred yards away from them. It is scary how fast the cannon fires. The girl drops dead instantly. Her lips blue from berry juice.

Katniss was standing with her back to Peeta and jumps around at the sound, as if she expects him to lie dead at her feet. But instead the hovercraft appears and takes the girl away. Peeta comes to a different conclusion as he grabs Katniss by the arm. “Climb. He’ll be here in a second. We’ll stand a better chance fighting him from above.”

But Katniss shakes her head. “No, Peeta, she's your kill, not Cato's.”

“What? I haven't even seen her since the first day,” he says. “How could I have killed her?”

Katniss holds out the berries and explains to him that they’re deadly. They come up with the idea to put some in a pouch and accidentally drop them at Cato’s feet when he’s hunting them, hoping he’ll be stupid enough to eat them. I don’t think it’ll come to that. Because it’ll be such a boring end to the Games, the Gamemakers will do whatever it takes to prevent that from happening. Maybe even warn him in some way about the berries.

Katniss and Peeta build a fire and roast their food on it. All the while anxiously looking out for Cato. He’s not coming and finally they decide to seek cover for the night. Katniss has been cranky
all day, so I’m happy to see she gives in to Peeta’s request to spend the night in their cave. Once they’re there they’re both spent and Peeta falls asleep soon after they’ve entered the cave. As Katniss tucks him in and presses a kiss on his forehead I can’t help but wonder if this was for the audience or not. Her primary goal is survival, but when it comes to this boy, I’m still not sure what her motives are.

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In the morning I have breakfast in the main hall. When Xander arrives together with Seneca Crane I get suspicious. What are they doing together? Did he try to persuade Seneca to do something that will favor his tribute? It would be against the rules, but only if someone finds out. I realize I’m the suspicious kind of guy, because them entering together might as well be coincidence. They both greet me and then Seneca tells us today will be the day. “There’s only these three left, so we’re going to end it today. To drive them together we’ve depleted every water source except for the lake. This means you’re not allowed to give them any water as a gift either,” Seneca explains. What he says makes sense, driving them together won’t work if we, as mentors, could give them water. But I don’t intend to, I want these Games to be over with already. To take my kids home and go to live with them as my neighbors in the Victor’s Village in District Twelve. Not that I’m really looking forward to that, but I’m sick and tired of the Capitol after about three weeks. I miss my liquor and my solitude.

“We’re also going to send in mutts,” Seneca continues, “They’ll come around sunset.” He shows us the muttations he made for these Games. They’re wolf-like creatures, with big canines and red tongues lolling out of their mouths. They also have an eerie human quality over them, as Seneca shows us they can stand on their hind legs. “We’ve added something extra to them as well,” Seneca says smiling, “They have the eyes of the dead tributes.”

“They have what?” I ask him, incredulous.

“They’re not their real eyes of course,” Seneca explains, “But they’re exact replica’s, you hardly see the difference.”

“That’s disgusting,” I mutter under my breath. Fortunately neither Seneca nor Xander hear me, a comment like that won’t earn me any points.

In my room I’m pacing back and forth, nervous about what will happen. Katniss is sleeping, Peeta’s watching over her as the day drags on. Cato has put on the armor that was in his pack. I realize this armor will make it harder for the mutts to kill him. Not impossible though, never impossible.

When Katniss finally awakes and they head out to the stream, they find it depleted. “They’re driving us to the lake,” Katniss says. “Do you want to go straightaway or wait until the water's tapped out?”

“Let’s go now,” Peeta suggests, “While we’ve had food and rest. Let’s just go end this thing.” I’m glad Peeta shares my opinion on ending this thing, but I’m getting more and more anxious as they walk towards the lake, knowing what awaits them there.

Out of nowhere my own voice sounds in my head, Chaff, you have to begin to accept her imminent death. And how I condemned him for getting too involved. He should not have cared, then it would not have hurt.

But here I am, with my big mouth. Caring. For crying out loud, I’m caring! Why did these kids creep up on me like they did? Why did I let them?

Effie and I watch Cato leaving Thresh’s camp and head out of the field and into the woods. He’s on the main screen, since Katniss and Peeta are doing nothing but sit at the lake, waiting for the sun to set. There’s a pop-up on our screen, telling us the mutts will be released in five minutes. Cato’s crashing through the trees into the direction of the lake when they appear behind him. When he notices them running after him he throws his spear into their direction and then sets off. He’s quickly approaching Katniss and Peeta and they hear him coming, without knowing what he’s running from.
Katniss aims her bow and shoots at him when he breaks through the bushes, but the arrow can’t make a dent in his armor.
“He’s got some kind of body armor!” she shouts to Peeta. Cato doesn’t even seem to notice them. He runs straight past them and heads for the Cornucopia in the field. It doesn’t take Katniss and Peeta long to realize what he’s running from and they turn to follow him.

Peeta’s leg is still hurt and it prevents him from sprinting. He’s going as fast as he can but the mutts are faster. Cato started climbing the Cornucopia and when Katniss arrives she finally remembers Peeta and turns around. She arms her bow and takes down one of the mutts while Peeta screams at her to climb. Both of them are always thinking of her safety first. Peeta’s there as well and she helps him up. Now they’re on the Cornucopia, but the mutts aren’t discouraged that easily. As they attack again, Katniss recognizes their eyes and shrieks out in horror. Then one of them lets its teeth sink in Peeta’s calf. He’s almost toppling over the side but Katniss has the wherewithal to hang on to him. He attacks the mutt with the knife and manages to crawl back on the golden horn. They climb to the top where Cato’s waiting for them. Before they’re aware of what’s happening he hauls Peeta up and holds him in a headlock. Katniss aims her arrow at him, but what she going to do? Shoot him? She can’t do that without killing Peeta too and all three of them know this.

Cato starts laughing, “Shoot me and he goes down with me.”

My hands are balled up into fists and I press them both against my eyes. Really need some alcohol now.

Effie takes one of my hands from my face. “It’s going to be alright,” she says, “Watch!”

We watch and see Peeta draws a bloody X on Cato’s hand. Katniss sends the arrow and it pierces his hand. As Cato cries out in pain Peeta slams his elbow in his abdomen and pushes him over the side of the Cornucopia. He almost goes down with him and Katniss lunges forward to take a hold of him while Cato plummets on the ground. Katniss and Peeta are standing on top of the Cornucopia, hanging on to each other for dear life, waiting for the cannon to fire. But no such luck. Cato’s wearing his suit and he won’t go down without a fight. There are too many mutts though, so after what seems like forever, we see them dragging the boy into the Cornucopia where they start gnawing on him. The whole thing is repulsive and because of his armor and the bloodlust from the Gamemakers, he’s not dying. The anthem plays and he’s still alive. Katniss is trying to stop the bleeding in Peeta’s leg by tying a tourniquet around it. They go to lie down, Peeta’s unfastening his jacket, pressing Katniss against him and closes it around both of them. The air is cold and a biting wind sends their teeth chattering. I see the temperature in the arena will continue to drop. It’s going to be a long, cold night.

“Cato may win this thing yet,” Katniss whispers to Peeta.
“Don't you believe it,” Peeta replies, but he’s shaking heavily and I see his wound is still dripping blood, even though Katniss has bandaged it with her shirt.

The night begins and goes on and on. I don’t sleep. Effie doesn’t sleep. Katniss and Peeta are lying on the Cornucopia while the mutts are working on Cato. It seems to last forever, this night. I’m already thinking about the nightmares my kids will endure after this has come to an end. When morning comes Cato’s still alive and I’m completely drained of energy. Peeta’s face has lost all color and I’m afraid he won’t make it, if something doesn’t happen fast. Katniss reaches the same conclusion, takes her last arrow out of the tourniquet and aims for the boy in the horn. It’s an act of mercy, really, to kill him now and end his suffering. Her arrow hits target and the cannon fires.

“Then we won,” Peeta says hollowly.
“Hurray for us,” Katniss answers, but there’s no joy in her voice either.

After this nothing happens. No hovercraft appears, no trumpets announce their victory.

“What’s going on?” I ask Effie. “Why aren’t they picking them up, the boy is bleeding to death.”

Effie shrugs, “I don’t understand it either. I’m going to find out what the holdup is.”

She leaves and Katniss and Peeta make their way back to the lake. While Katniss makes him drink
water out of her hands, the hovercraft appears to retrieve the body, but then still, nothing happens. 
“What are they waiting for?” says Peeta weakly.
“I don’t know,” Katniss replies as she gets up and scoops up the arrow that still lies there from when she tried to shoot Cato earlier.

The door to my room opens and Effie appears. All the blood drained from her face and her eyes wide in alarm.
“What’s wrong?” I ask, a great feeling of unease coming over me. Effie just shakes her head, unable to speak a word and then points to the screen. I turn back and see nothing alarming, but then Claudius Templesmith’s voice fills the air.
“Greetings to the final contestants of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games. The earlier revision has been revoked. Closer examination of the rule book has disclosed that only one winner may be allowed,” he says. “Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor.”

“No!” I shout out, “NO! NO! NO!”
I knew it! I should have known it all along. They never intended for both of them to live. They want her to kill him, that’s what they want. To tarnish her image. “NO!” I scream again, not able to say anything else.
Effie, next to me, is crying softly. The tears sliding down her cheeks, ruining her make-up.
“I’m so sorry,” she whispers and she wraps an arm around my shoulder. Normally I’d shake her off, but I’m too befuddled and shocked to react.

We sink back in the chairs, staring at the screen where Katniss and Peeta are taking in the news. "If you think about it, it's not that surprising," Peeta says softly while he’s standing up. His hand takes the knife from his belt and at that exact same point Katniss arms her bow so quickly. The arrow pointed straight at his heart. Peeta’s knife slips in the lake, of course he never intended to use it, but she’s misinterpreted him. Now that she does understand his willingness to die for her she drops the bow, her cheeks burn in shame.

“No,” Peeta says. “Do it.” He picks up the weapons and gives them back to her.
“I can't, I won’t,” she shakes her head and I feel the pain they feel at this horrendous fate they’re facing.

“Do it. Before they send those mutts back or something. I don’t want to die like Cato,” he says.
“Then you shoot me!” Katniss snaps at him, “You shoot me and go home and live with it!”
“You know I can't,” Peeta says, “Fine, I'll go first anyway.”

He unties Katniss’s shirt of his wound, his blood dripping on the ground. He’s very right, he’s going first. Am I really going to have to watch him die? Didn’t I make my peace with that before the Games begun? Then why is this so upsetting for me? Effie takes my hand, entwines it with hers and squeezes it. I cast her a look and see she’s still crying.

But Katniss doesn’t condone. “No, you can't kill yourself,” she says, she’s frantic while she kneels down in front of him, trying to stop his bleeding.


“You're not leaving me here alone,” Katniss replies, panicked. I’m panicking as well, pressing my one hand against my face while the other is holding on to Effie.

“Listen,” Peeta says while he pulls her to her feet. “We both know they have to have a victor. It can only be one of us. Please, take it. For me.” He takes a deep breath and continues, “Katniss, I love you, I don’t even want to live a life without you. You are my life and really, I’m okay with this. Knowing you’ll live and you’ll love and have a good life. Please!”

Katniss seems in a daze as she takes the pouch with the poisonous berries from her belt. When Peeta sees it he takes her wrist in his hand, “No, I won't let you!”

“Trust me,” Katniss whispers. They stare into each other’s eyes, communicating in silence. A double suicide.

If they both die, then there won’t be a victor.
Would they let that happen?

Katniss divides the berries between the two of them. “On the count of three?” she asks him.
Peeta leans down and kisses her. “The count of three,” he says.
They stand with their backs pressed together and their empty hands locked tight.
“What are they doing?” Effie says, while she squeezes my hand, actually hurting me with it.
“They can’t let them kill themselves!”
“Let’s hope not,” I growl, my voice strained with tension.
“Hold them out. I want everyone to see,” says Peeta, and then they begin their count.
What if they both die?
“One.”
They’re not going to let them die, right?
“Two.”
Nothing is happening. No one intervenes.
“Three.”
I guess they are going to let them die.
Both their heads bow down and their hands lift the berries to their lips.
And it’s at that moment that the trumpets begin to blare.
The frantic voice of Claudius Templesmith shouts out. “Stop! Stop! Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to present the victors of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! I give you - the tributes of District Twelve!”
Part 3: The Victor. Chapter 4: The Real Games

Chapter Summary

Katniss and Peeta are both declared winners but the danger isn't over yet. After worrying about Peeta's health, Haymitch finds out that his tributes are in great danger. He needs to keep them alive and safe from Snow's wrath, but how?

They did it! They managed to trick the Gamemakers into this double suicide scheme and now they’re both going to live.

While they spew out the berries, clean their mouths and fall in each other’s arms, Effie and I get up and walk to the main hall, knowing we’ll be expected there. The hall is filled with excited people who cheer us on as soon as they see us. A huge applause sounds and the audience is chanting the names of my kids. While people congratulate me I keep my eyes fixed on the large screen where I see Katniss and Peeta step on the ladder from the hovercraft that just appeared to pick them up. They stand close together on one ladder. While it hauls them into the hovercraft I see the blood is still pouring from Peeta’s leg and his face is paper white. The relief I felt vanishes by the looks of him. The camera stays on them, even though the Games are over. Once they’re inside of the hovercraft, Peeta collapses on the floor, unconscious. They’re immediately surrounded by doctors who take him away from her. Katniss is bewildered, she lunges forward, trying to reach him but someone lifts her up and puts her in another room. She’s screaming for the boy, his name over and over again until her voice breaks. She slumps down to the floor, a beverage in one hand, the other pressed against the glass.

I wish I could go over to be there with her, willing him to stay alive. But they’re still in the hovercraft and it will take about thirty minutes before they arrive at the Training Center. And I have be strong and smile and answer questions from reporters. So I steel myself, convinced that the doctor’s won’t let him die, even though I see his heart stops beating a couple of times.

Effie’s pulling at my arm, “Come, Haymitch, we’re going to the Training Center.” She guides me through the crowd. People are hugging us and asking us how we feel. We smile, we say we’re extremely happy and that we’re heading to the Center now to greet our victors.

About twenty minutes later we’re at the roof of the Training Center and watch the hovercraft land. The door slides open and the doctors come running out with Peeta on a stretcher. He looks so white and lies so still, the sight of him scares me to death. I walk alongside the bed, place my hand on his as I ask the doctor about him.

“He went into cardiac arrest two times. We managed to get him back, fortunately. He lost a lot of blood. We’re taking him to the hospital wing now. You can come with us.”

I hesitate, have a feeling I should check on Katniss as well, although I’m sure she’ll be fine. “Go, Haymitch,” Effie says, “I’ll stay here with Katniss, she’ll be alright.”

“Okay, thank you,” I say and I hurry after the doctors, who already disappeared inside the building.

Peeta’s in surgery, but the walls are glass so I can watch. They’re pumping litres of blood into his body. They also try to take care of the wound in his leg. He lies naked on the table so I see the weird colour change in his leg, starting right under his knee. The tourniquet was on there for an entire night and by the looks of it, there’s been irreparable damage done. One of the doctors comes out of the room and approaches me and I know it’s not good. “Mr. Abernathy, I’m sorry,” the doctor begins. I interrupt him, “What can you do to save him?”

“We have to amputate the leg, the tourniquet has cut off all the blood supply. It’s either his leg or
his life. She did a good job, if she hadn’t done it he’d died for sure, but the leg can’t be saved.”


“Now that he’s getting blood he’s already doing better,” the doctor tells me, “The amputation is going to be difficult and he’ll have to practice walking with a prosthetic. But once the surgery is over we’re sure he’ll live.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, my knees buckle and I sink back on a chair.

“Well be fine,” the doctor assures me as he pats my back.

I stay in the chair for a long time. An attendant comes to give me a drink and moments later Effie arrives. “They had to sedate Katniss,” Effie says, “She was completely out of her mind.” She shakes her head as if she disapproves and it takes all my restrains not to smack her in the head. It’s Effie, I tell myself, she doesn’t know how to be a normal person.

There are not a lot of Capitolites who are normal. Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever met one. Maybe Cinna and Portia resemble normalcy. I don’t know them well enough to make a considered judgment. Effie obviously isn’t a normal person, at least not in my eyes, I’ve known that for years now and am a master in upsetting her but in calming her down too. I place my hand on hers and give her one of my rare smiles. “They’re going to live, both of them,” I say, “Who would have thought they could pull that off?”

“I know,” Effie says while she taps my hand. “If Katniss hadn’t come up with those berries who knows what would’ve happened? I’m glad we don’t have to consider it.”

Her comment pulls me up short. What if Katniss hadn’t thought of the double suicide act? Then one of them would have died and the Gamemakers would get their way. This means they don’t get their way now. This trick with the berries, however you want to interpret it, is a way of defiance. Like my trick with the force field at the edge of the arena. And there’s no way they’re going to let her get away with it. I think about how they punished me, killed my family, and I know I can’t let that happen to my kids. But what can I do to protect them? I don’t have any power.

I look at Effie next to me and decide to ask her about it. I think this is the first time in my life that I want her opinion on something. Wonder what brought that on. Probably because I can’t deny that I like her way of thinking. The broth, the lamb stew. Those were her ideas and they were good ideas.

“Effie, I’m worried about them,” I tell her.

“Why?” she asks, “They’ll be fine, both of them. They’re in good hands.”

“It’s not that. It’s those berries,” I say, while I take a sip of my drink, wondering if I’m doing the right thing here by voicing my doubts to Effie. “They changed the rules back, they didn’t intend for both of them to live.”

“But they had to stop them, because otherwise they would’ve killed themselves,” Effie says.

“I know that, but how will the Gamemakers accept that?” I ask.

“You think they won’t accept it?” Effie asks and as I nod to her question she shakes her head.

“But Haymitch, this year’s Games told us an amazing story! It was a huge success. Everyone is thrilled to see that the love of our children for each other was more important than life,” her voice takes on an extra enthusiastic tone, “They love each other so much, it’s wonderful to see, and the Gamemakers saw that too. That love is stronger than life. What a great message is that.”

Of course. That’s it, she’s right. If everyone is stupid enough to believe that these kids were only motivated by love, and nothing else, then that’s what makes it acceptable. That is the only angle which we can play so we might get away with what Katniss did.

But it’s not true, I know that for sure. Katniss’s primary urge is to survive and she did what she had to do to stay alive and keep Peeta alive as well. Yes, she didn’t want Peeta to die, but I don’t believe she has her whole livelihood depended on him. She can survive just fine without him. I’m not entirely sure about her feelings towards him, she’s not indifferent and after what they’ve been through together, no one can deny there’s a connection between them that would be hard to break. But she wasn’t motivated by love alone.
Peeta on the other hand, he’s already there. He was already willing to give up his life for her. He’s in love with her, no doubt about it. I know now what I have to do. To keep her safe, to keep us all safe, I have to warn her. Have to tell her she needs to keep up the act. To convince everyone, the Gamemakers, the president, that she’s a besotted, love-struck little girl. That she just couldn’t imagine life without him. I need to coach her and get it into her thick head how important this is.

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“It will take some training before he’ll be able to walk properly and be ready for the televised reunion,” the head doctor, Dr. Mendall, tells me, “But the surgery went really well and he’ll make a full recovery.”

“A full recovery?” I ask as I stare her in the eyes, emphasizing the word ‘full.’

“You know what I mean,” Dr. Mendall says, “He’s going to be fine, that’s what’s most important.” She flips over her chart, indicating this part of the conversation has come to an end. She taps with her polished fingernail on Katniss’s file, “Now, I’d like to talk to you about Katniss as well. We’ve given her a full body polish, all the scars are gone so she looks flawless. But she lost so much weight and her breasts are a bit—”

“No. Absolutely. Not.” I interrupt her, because I know instantly where she’s going with this, “You’re not going to alter anything. She stays the way she is.”

“But Mr. Abernathy,” the doctor begins.

“It’s not going to happen,” I say firmly, “Over my dead body. I’m serious about it.”

“As a matter of fact, we don’t need your consent,” the doctor says petulantly.

“The hell you do!” I shout out in anger, “You’re not laying a finger on her! Mark my words!”

Effie comes walking down the hall, alarmed by my raised voice. “What’s the matter?” she asks.

I’m still furious as I tell her they want to alternate Katniss’s breasts and to my surprise and relief, Effie takes my side. “Katniss is beautiful the way she is, and this is the way Peeta loves her too. I agree with Haymitch, she shouldn’t be changed,” she shakes her head and I’ve never seen her more defiant. Effie, the rebel, I think silently and the whole idea makes me chuckle. “And I also think Cinna would disapprove,” she adds. I look at her, grateful that she came to my rescue. Effie can be really determined if she’s got something on her mind.

The doctor shakes her head, “Okay then, if everybody feels so strongly about it.”

“We do,” Effie says, “We feel very strongly about it.”

The doctor walks away and I open the door to Peeta’s room to check on him. He’s still in a coma, but it’s artificial. They plan on waking him tomorrow to try on the prosthetic. Then the day after that, in the evening, will be their live televised reunion. They’re not even allowed see each other before that. I’m thinking this is a good idea, especially because of Katniss. I don’t really want her talking to Peeta, afraid she’ll say something about my communicating with her through the gifts, or something else that will get him to doubt her love for him.

When I visit her room after Peeta’s, she’s out cold. They’ve been putting her asleep for all these days. Partly because she was as rabid as a wild animal and partly because of the treatment on her ear. She’s lost her hearing during the explosion of the food pyramid. Surgery was possible and the doctor assured me she’ll regain full hearing.

In conclusion, both of them will be fine. Physically, that is.

I go back to the main hall of the Training Center, in search of Cinna. Since Finnick brought him to the Building, I know he can be trusted and he can be of help with the act we have to put on. When I find him I take him outside, where there are no bugs or microphones, and I tell him about Katniss and my fear for her safety. At that moment it becomes clear that Cinna is way ahead of me.

“I’ve had a talk with Plutarch Heavensbee the day of their victory,” Cinna says in a low voice, “Our suspicions were correct, he’s with the rebels. He came to warn me about Katniss. He says it’s pretty obvious that the berries will get her into trouble.”
“Heavensbee, huh?” I say, “He acted weird during the Games, even winked at me one time. So you’re sure about where his allegiance lie?”
“T’m sure,” Cinna answers. I’m still not convinced but I don’t question it.
“And what do you think we should do?” I ask, “I’m thinking she needs to convince the world that she was motivated by love. No defiance, no rebellious thinking. It’s just a silly sixteen year old.”
“Exactly,” Cinna nods, “The dress I made will tell that story too. I’m planning on making her look radiant but very young. They just told me the dress needs padding in the bustier because you voted against body alteration?”
“True, they wanted to surgically enlarge her breasts. I told them they can’t touch her.” I say, still feeling angry about it, “I guess this is the alternative. I can live with that.”
“Yes, it’s obviously the better option, but it still bothers me,” Cinna says, “I want to show her off as childlike, a very fresh and innocent look. It helps take the focus of the defiant, feisty part of her. This padding isn’t going to help with that.”
“Well, I’ve never seen a pair of stylists as talented as you and Portia are,” I say truthfully, “So I’m sure you can pull it off.”

***

In the morning of the next day, Cinna, Effie and I sit in the hall of the hospital floor. Portia is busy with adjusting Peeta’s shoes and trousers because of the prosthetic leg. The rest of us have nothing to do but wait until Katniss is finally well enough to prep her for the reunion. The door of her room opens and we see her step out into the corridor.

“Peeta!” she calls out, obviously eager to see him again, which makes me smile. To call for him is her first reaction, as if it’s a natural thing to do. Makes me wonder if she even needs any coaching from me on the besotted schoolgirl act. When Effie calls her name, Katniss turns around and sees us. She breaks out in a run and we all get up from our chairs to greet her. To my surprise and satisfaction she jumps into my arms first. This is the moment when I really feel the victory, and how grateful I am to have her back. This amazingly strong and feisty girl who managed to not only stay alive, but bring Peeta back as well. I whisper in her ear, “Nice job, sweetheart.”

Effie’s all teary when she tells Katniss how she and Peeta are pearls, I have no idea what that’s about. After Katniss hugs Cinna she looks around and a worried expression appears on her face.

“Where’s Portia? Is she with Peeta? He is all right, isn’t he? I mean, he’s alive?” she almost trips over the words and I hear the anxiety in them.

“He’s fine.” I reassure her, “Only they want to do your reunion live on air at the ceremony.”

“Oh. That’s all,” she says, clearly comforted by my words. “I guess I’d want to see that myself.”

“Go on with Cinna. He has to get you ready,” I tell her and nudge them along. Cinna wraps his arm around her and brings her with him.

Just before lunch Doctor Mendall finally lets me see Peeta while he’s awake. Effie and I walk to his room and I enter first. He sits straight up in bed, looking groomed and healthy. A huge difference from how he was on the day they lifted them out of the arena.

I walk over to the bed and put an arm around his shoulder, thinking how amazing it is that he’s here with me now.

“You did a great job, boy,” I say.

“How is Katniss?” he asks me, “Can I see her?”

“She is fine, eager to see you too, but they decided to do your reunion live.” I say.

“I know, they told me that already,” Peeta replies impatiently, “But everything is so unreal and I want to see her.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do anything about it,” I say, feeling bad for the boy. He reminds me of how I was in the first days after my Games. So disoriented and scared. Now Katniss is his only link to reality and he wants that reassurance of the few things he’s still sure about. At least he has her, I think, with a mixed feeling of relief and resentment, I was alone. “Just a couple of hours and you
can see her, okay?” I say to him. He nods and I let go of him.

Effie comes from behind me and gives Peeta a tight hug. “Peeta! It is so great to see you, you look wonderful. I am so proud of the two of you,” she says, “I’ve told everybody how you both are like pearls and how amazing you were!”

Again with the pearls. The woman is crazy. I shake my head but a smile is playing on my lips.

Then Peeta’s lunch comes and with it Portia and his prep-team. Now Effie and I have to get to our own preps as well, to get ready for the ceremony tonight.

***

I’m about to go to my own room in the Training Center to get prepped when an attendant hands me a note.

Meet me outside in half an hour. P.H.

What on earth? P.H. Who’s that? I take the elevator and outside on the square I see Plutarch Heavensbee standing next to the fountain. I walk over to him and act nonchalant while he starts talking. “First of all, I’m not here and you’ve never talked to me,” he says. I nod almost unnoticeable. “Good. Now you have to warn your tribute. You may have suspicions but believe me, it’s worse. There are uprisings in several districts. Eight is a mess, eleven and four as well. She made a fool out of the Games and the Capitol. You know that as well as I do.”

I nod my head again. Riots in the districts, I suspected it, but not as big as this. “But as long as they believe she did it because she was in love, it will work. Don’t you think?”

“She has to be very convincing, because let’s be honest, she was playing it, that much was clear. And there are enough people who’ve seen that. Maybe these Capitolites can be fooled, but people in the districts aren’t that naïve, and neither is President Snow,” Plutarch says in a low voice.

“I’ll tell her to be convincing,” I say.

“You do that.” Plutarch says, “She’s valuable for the cause, Abernathy. She can do so much, but not if the President gets rid of her or her family. So that means she needs protection first and foremost. Hopefully next year, when the backbone of the rebellion here has grown stronger, she can be a valuable asset.”

“What do you know about that?” I ask, surprised that this Gamemaker seems to be far more rebellious than I thought.

“I know a lot, I know about the Building. I know about District Thirteen,” Plutarch says and I raise my eyebrows in question.

“Is District Thirteen in on it?” I ask, “I thought they were too weak to be of any help.”

“All in good time, Abernathy, all in good time,” Plutarch says vaguely, “Protect your tribute, she’s golden.”

“Okay,” I nod and Plutarch walks away after he repeated that he was never here.

During prep in my own room I start to worry about Katniss. The feeling of unease is nagging at me. When I saw her almost begging for Peeta I thought she didn’t need coaching, but now, after this talk with Plutarch, I have to reconsider. She needs to be warned, to be careful with what she says and what she does. When I meet Effie an hour before the show starts I see she’s concerned too. For her to be focused on this instead of her own greatest achievement is quite something.

“I’ve heard rumors,” she whispers to me, “Apparently they’re not happy with her, Haymitch. What are we going to do?”

I see Effie is genuinely worried about Katniss’s wellbeing. She won’t connect it with rebels or anything, but she has a keen eye for these things, she at least suspects Katniss is in danger.

“Don’t worry,” I say, “I’ll talk to Katniss, I have it under control.”

Just before the reunion starts I seek her out, to see Cinna’s work and to warn her. Katniss is standing in the area under the podium, looking nervous. When I touch her shoulder she jumps in alarm.

“Easy, just me. Let's have a look at you,” I say. She turns around and the light shimmering off the
dress makes her look very young, just like Cinna intended. It’ll do.
“Good enough,” I say.
Katniss raises her eyebrows, “But what?”
I look around, wondering if this place is bugged, and I decide I can’t risk it. “But nothing. How about a hug for luck?”
She puts her arms around my neck and I grab her tightly, hiding my face in her hair, against her ear and start to speak very fast and quiet. “Listen up. You're in trouble. Word is the Capitol's furious about you showing them up in the arena. The one thing they can't stand is being laughed at and they're the joke of Panem,” I say.
Katniss plays along when she lets out a laugh and say, “So, what?”
“You only defense can be you were so madly in love you weren't responsible for your actions.”
I pull back and adjust the band in her hair, that got shifted slightly. “Got it, sweetheart?”
Her eyes meet mine, grey Seam eyes. “Got it,” she says, “Did you tell Peeta this?”
“Don't have to,” I say, “He's already there.”
“But you think I'm not?” Katniss asks while she straightens the bright red bow tie around my neck.
“Since when does it matter what I think? Better take our places.” I lead her to the metal circle from where she’ll be lifted to the stage. “This is your night, sweetheart. Enjoy it.” I take her face in my hands and kiss her on the forehead before I disappear into the gloom, crossing my fingers that she’ll play it right.

***

Caesar Flickerman is introducing us to the audience. First the prep-teams, then Effie, then the stylists. I’m next and I walk a bit uneasily towards Caesar. This is the first time I’m standing here as a successful mentor, managed to save not only one, but two kids. It’s quite unheard of and the audience is ecstatic at the sight of me. I couldn’t care less, I want to see Katniss and Peeta’s reunion and see if they pull it off.

As soon as they’re lifted onto the stage Katniss throws herself in Peeta’s arms, making him almost trip over because he’s not entirely used to the artificial leg yet. But he steadies himself and in the next twenty minutes we have to watch them holding and kissing each other as if there’s nothing and no one else left in the world but them. Caesar tries to break them apart but Peeta just pushes him away, making the audience go berserk. He’s playing it exactly right.
I watch them kiss and despite the rumors and the warning from Plutarch, I’m feeling genuinely happy for them now. But there’s a ceremony going on and enough is enough, so finally I break them apart and nudge them to the loveseat on the podium. They go to sit next to each other, but this won’t do, it’s too stiff. I make eye contact with Katniss and she takes off her sandals and curls up against him, much better.

After we’ve watched a three hours long summary from the Games we’re off to the president’s mansion for the Victory Banquet. During the banquet I talk with Chaff who tells me in cryptic notes that things are rough in District Eleven, but that the real uprising seems to be in District Eight. Finnick joins us and says it’s the same in Four. “Things are starting to roll,” he says.
I wonder where this will take us, it’s quite unbelievable to think Katniss has brought this on with her actions. It makes it even more imperative that she plays it right at this moment. This rebellion isn’t far enough to explode, Plutarch is right about that, and she needs to give a convincing performance. I can’t help but feel extremely worried about her and Peeta’s safety and I can just kick myself in the shins for loving them. But it’s too late now, I can’t stop it, can’t go back.

As soon as we’re back in the Trainer Center I tell Portia to take Peeta with her and I personally escort Katniss to her door.
“Why can’t I talk to him?” she asks.
Because I don’t trust you with him, I think, who knows what you’ll tell him. But all I say is that she needs sleep for the closing interview tomorrow. Then I go to Peeta’s to check on him. When I
open the door I hear him say to Portia, “I want to speak to Katniss first.”
I shake my head. “Not now, she’s sleeping and you should be sleeping as well. The interview is in
the afternoon and you need your rest.” I walk out of the room, thinking how I can prevent them
from talking to each other. It’s Katniss who I don’t trust. I’m afraid she’ll tell him that her actions
towards him were based on survival instead of love. However true that may be, I don’t want him
to hear that now, not knowing how he’ll react. So when I see she left her room in search of him
once already, I decide to lock her door.

***

The interview on the next day is going well. Peeta’s perfect as always, but Katniss is doing a
really good job, be it with a little help from Caesar.
When Caesar asked her what changed for her after the rule change, she says, “Maybe... because
for the first time... there was a chance I could keep him.
I give a huff of relief, knowing she pulls it off. The rest of the people in the room are genuinely
moved and even Caesar has to pull out a handkerchief. Then Peeta asks her, “So now that you’ve
got me, what are you going to do with me?”
She turns to face him and says, “Put you somewhere you can't get hurt.”
Peeta kisses her and I feel certain that what she’s saying here is the truth. It’s not like she doesn’t
care about him and that is obviously shown in this interview. She’s also shocked at the sight of
Peeta’s artificial leg. So much so that she’s unable to talk for a while. But then Caesar brings up
the moment with the berries and I feel the anticipation. She needs to do this just right.
“Katniss, I know you've had a shock, but I've got to ask.” Caesar says, “The moment when you
pulled out those berries. What was going on in your mind. hm?”
It takes her a long time to answer and what she says is almost inaudible and absolutely perfect,
“I don't know, I just... couldn't bear the thought of... being without him.”
“Peeta? Anything to add?” asks Caesar.
“No. I think that goes for both of us,” he says.
That’s it. She’s done it, it’s over and we can finally, finally go home. Katniss comes over and hugs
me.
“Okay?” she whispers.
“Perfect,” I answer.

Now it’s just a matter of going to the train and back home. When we make a small stop for fuel
the kids go out of the train to take a walk and I decide to follow them.
“Great job, you two. Just keep it up in the district until the cameras are gone. We should be okay,”
I tell them and walk back to the train.

***

Inside I go to the bar car and start drinking. The relief of escaping the Capitol is gone and a
dreading feeling is rushing over me. I’m going back home, but I’m not alone anymore.
And honestly, that scares the hell out of me.
Drinking. Drinking still. The alcohol is tainting my blood, drugging me. I’m trying to hang on to
the world of loneliness I was so used to, but it has come to an end and I am dreading the moment
when I will finally have to let go.

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